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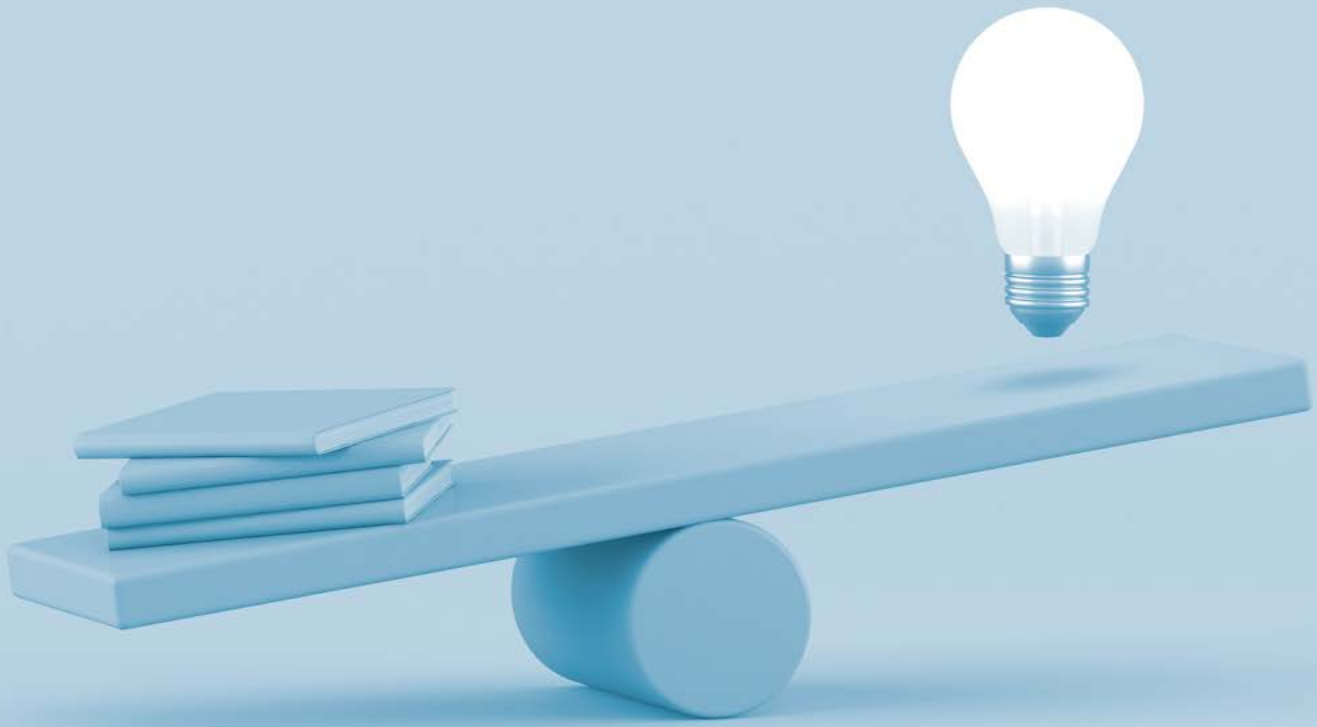
THE MAGAZINE OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION



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Internship Insights from Summer Interns at National Instruments 16

Key Takeaways and Trends in Remote UX Research 20

Student Perspectives of a Student Chapter 26

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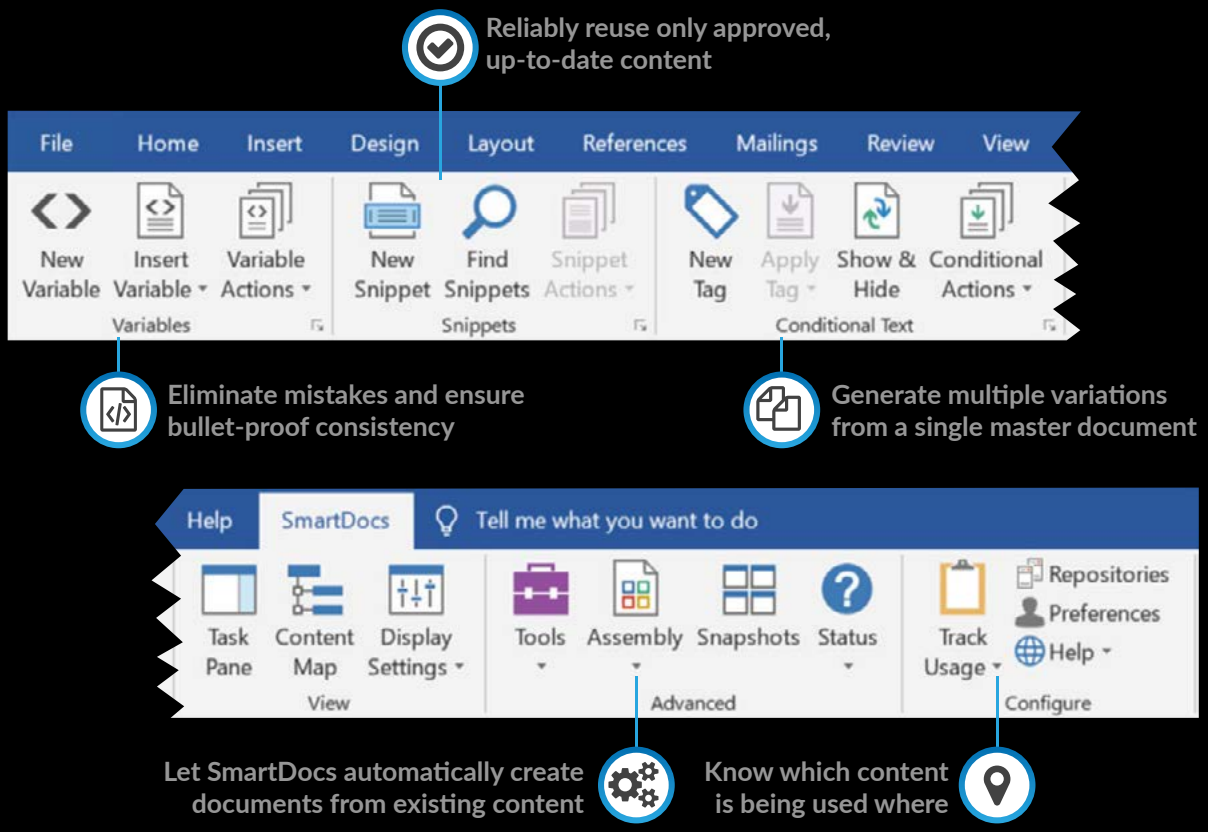

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Intercom, the magazine of the Society for Technical Communication, is published to provide practical examples and applications of technical communication that will promote its readers' professional development.

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A Note from the Editor

I HAVE BEEN trying to pull together a student-guest-edited issue of *Intercom* for two years, and thanks to Liz Herman's help in finding the right students and arranging the timing, here it is! I've always admired the technical communication faculty and programs at Texas Tech University, and this issue demonstrates that the students are top notch, as well.

In my short time working with this issue's guest editors, I was impressed with their vision for the issue, their professionalism, and their willingness to roll up their sleeves and dig into the work—even when it ran up against final exams.

Heavenly Freeman is a Student Member of STC and a master's degree student in technical communication. She is also a Graduate Teaching Assistant at Texas Tech and is passionate about her recently adopted dog, Cooper—I can relate!

Jelilat Adesiyan is a Student Member of STC, a PhD student in technical communication, and a part-time Graduate Instructor at Texas Tech. A devotee of interior and fashion design, she's passionate about bringing art to the technical, and she's looking to transition from academia to industry—hiring managers, act fast!

Rebekah Smith is a Student Member of STC and a master's degree student in technical communication at Texas Tech. She's interested in the rhetoric of online miscarriage narratives and document design, among other research topics, and she's looking forward to the next steps after graduation—I envision much success!

I encourage you to delve into Rebekah, Jelilat, and Heavenly's excellent guest editorial and the outstanding feature articles they have curated for this issue. If you are not a student, as you read, remember what it was like when *you* were a student—that's what I did—and consider the highly educated and motivated new graduates from these programs as you are searching for new hires.

My thanks again to Liz Herman; to Craig Baehr, Texas Tech STC Student Chapter advisor; and especially to Rebekah Smith, Jelilat Adesiyan, and Heavenly Freeman for their hard work on this issue. I also thank the authors who have provided such a rich portrait of the 2020 student perspective: Liz Jeffries, Jonah Schwartz, Omar Melhem, Patrick Behrens, Katie Tighe, Meghalee Das, and Kylie Jacobsen.

As always, we have a great column lineup for you, as well.

- In keeping with this issue's theme, Kit Brown-Hoekstra and Cindy Currie answer student questions in "Ask a Manager."
- Russell Willerton explores the ethical use of data in "Ethics."
- Kirk St.Amant describes how technical communicators can contribute to pandemic procedures in "Health & Medical Communication."
- Scott Abel interviews Stuart Culshaw of Technical Writers Without Borders in "Meet the Change Agents."

Don't miss all the latest STC news in the Society Pages, and be sure to engage the guest editors, the feature authors, the columnists, and me in discussion about the content. Reach out online at **www.stc.org/intercom**, by email (all of our email addresses are included), or by social media. We look forward to a great discussion about current student perspectives!

Until next time: To your studious success!

Andrea Ames

Guest Editorial

BY REBEKAH SMITH, JELILAT ADESIYAN, AND HEAVENLY FREEMAN | *STC Student Members*

As students of technical communication, our perspective on what it means to develop as professionals is informed largely by the courses we take, our internship opportunities, and professional associations. We, the Texas Tech University STC Student Chapter, strive to prepare ourselves to make meaningful contributions to the industry. One contribution that we believe we can make is shedding light on student perspectives. Moving into the professional world is a defining transition for students and recent graduates entering the job market. Getting into the minds of students can reveal fresh perspectives on the benefits of engaging with STC student chapters, providing internships in your workspaces, or even returning to school for further education.

Even if they happen slowly, trends in collegiate settings are likely to affect the future of technical communication—and we believe that students and recent graduates are that future. As we considered submissions for this issue, we wanted to highlight ways students pursue networking opportunities, prepare for the job market, conduct research, and seek community involvement. The submissions we received profile a variety of ways students access these valuable resources. Who could better describe the current climate of transitioning into the workplace than people who are currently experiencing it? Whether you're in a position to hire recent graduates or interns, curious about what's happening in academia and STC student chapters, or you're a student yourself, this issue is designed to help you see students' points of view.

Beginning our special issue are two nontraditional student profiles. The first, "Going Back to College in My 30s: The Journey of a Nontraditional Student," was written by Liz Jeffries. Liz is currently attending Metropolitan State University of Denver and shares her insights about the hurdles of going back to school for a bachelor's degree and making meaningful moves forward with her degree plan.

Following Liz's article is a second student profile by Jonah Schwartz, "Still Growing: A Long Journey into Technical Communication." Jonah's narrative elaborates on his decision to seek a master's degree and describes the support and networking opportunities provided to him during his time at Eastern Carolina University and as an active member in STC Carolina. Both Jonah and Liz provide insights into how their programs and extracurricular involvement shape their workplace expectations and readiness.

In the third article, "Internship Insights from Summer Interns at National Instruments," Omar Melhem and Patrick Behrens share how their National Instruments (NI) internships have been an important step in preparing them as up-and-coming professionals. Katie Tighe, NI recruiter and technical communicator, provides bonus content from the business perspective on what their company looks for in their interns and the benefits these interns bring to NI toolchains and teams. Internships play an increasingly important role in preparing students for professional positions, and we hope companies with or without current internship positions will consider the benefits associated with taking on interns.

Another article that we felt strongly about selecting for the issue was Meghalee Das's "Key Takeaways and Trends in Remote Research." The article highlights adjustments she made to complete her own user experience research in the midst of the pandemic shutdowns of early 2020. Though the long-term implications of COVID-19 on students and recent graduates are yet to be seen, Meghalee discusses how coordinating research efforts through technology could be a strength recent graduates bring to the industry and provides her key takeaways as a researcher.

Concluding our issue, Kylie Jacobsen ties in the role STC student chapters can play in professional development in her article, "Student Perspectives of a Student Chapter." Kylie provides helpful insights for furthering the funding opportunities and influence of student chapters in our communities and suggests ways professional STC members can get involved. She also recognizes the importance of student chapters in developing professional skills and engaging with the larger STC community.

Ultimately, we are one STC community: students, recent graduates, part-time writers and editors, and long-time professionals. We come from many backgrounds and work in a variety of fields, and that makes it all the more important for us to see one another's perspectives. We hope this issue of *Intercom* adds to your understanding of how student experiences might intersect with your own.

All aboard,

Rebekah, Jelilat, and Heavenly

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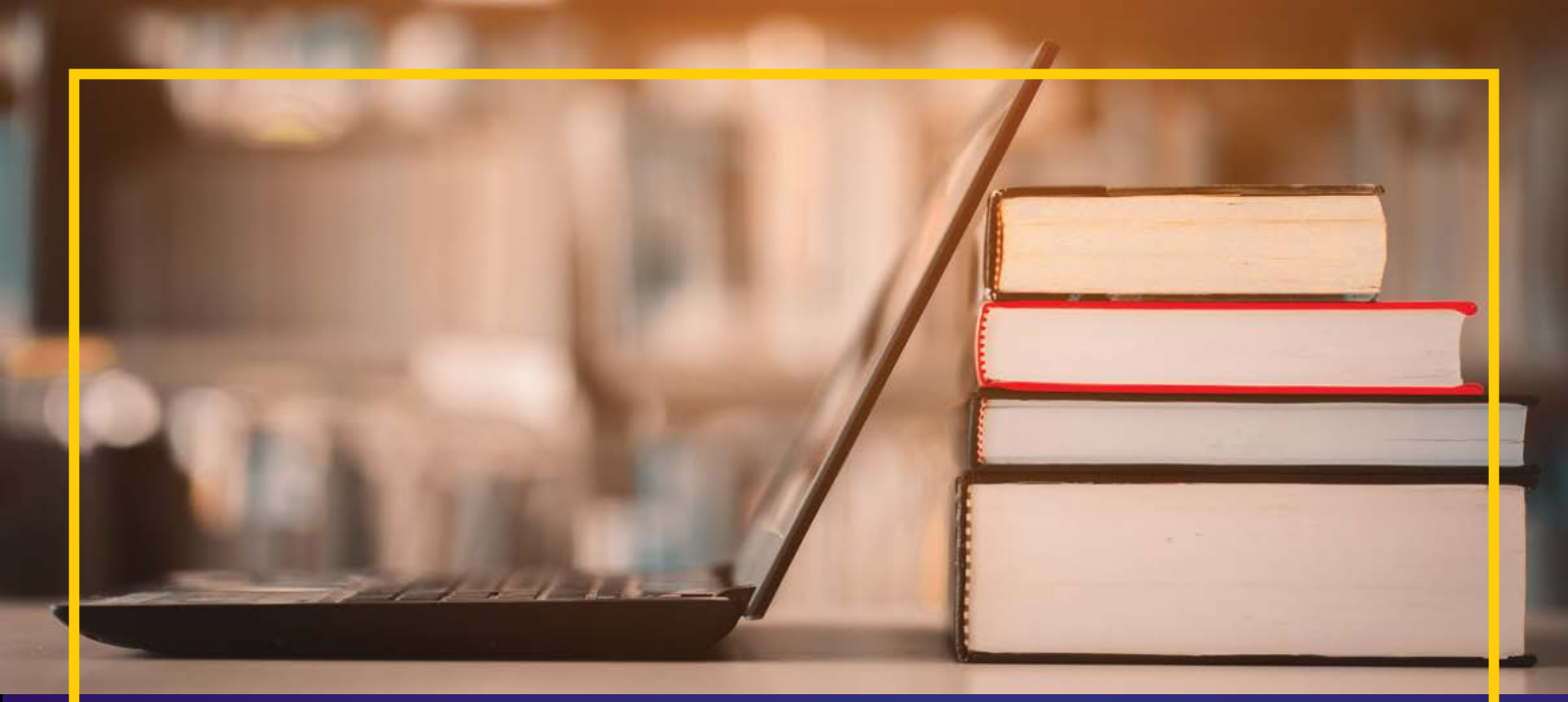

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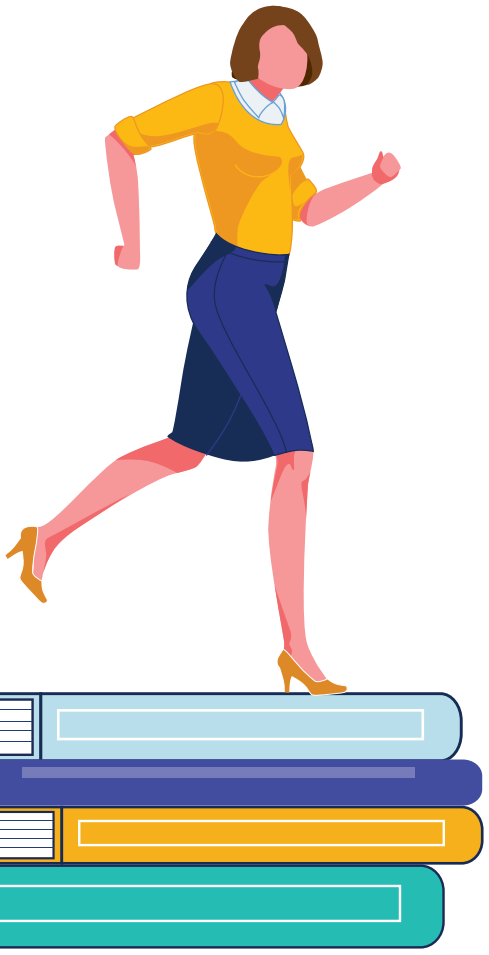
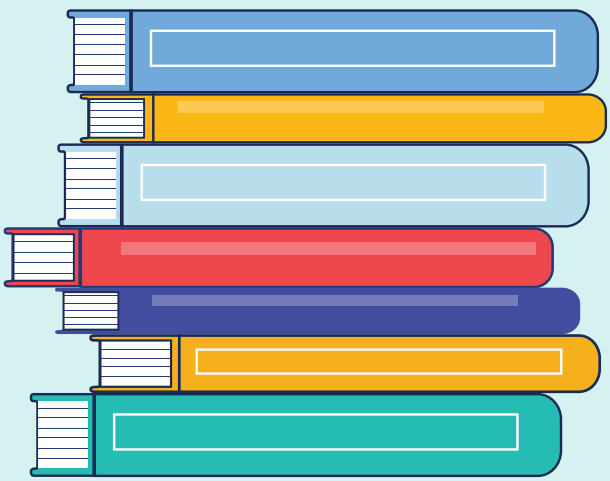
Going Back to College in My 30s: The Journey of a Nontraditional Student

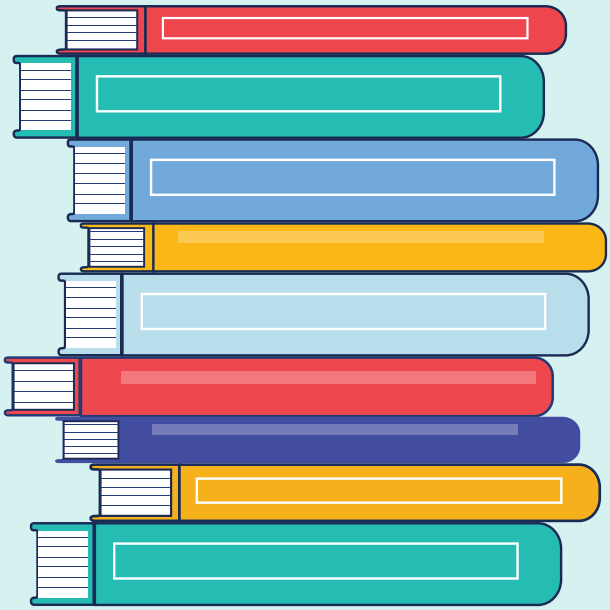


By ELIZABETH JEFFRIES | *STC Student Member*

HAVE YOU EVER thought about going back to college? I was 36 when I decided to go back to school to get my bachelor's degree. I had gone to college after graduating high school but got completely lost. Academically I was ready. Mentally? I crashed and burned.

Four colleges and five school years later, I only had an associate degree in general studies. I was in my 30s, bouncing from minimum wage job to minimum wage job. I was tired. Tired of having to start over every time I switched jobs, struggling for raises and to earn a decent salary. Tired of being skilled enough for my chosen career but stymied by the lack of a degree. Tired of having this huge regret in my life.





My boyfriend encouraged me to go back to get my bachelor's degree to change all of that.

Making the decision to go back wasn't hard. Choosing what I wanted to do wasn't hard. I decided to go into technical writing, combining my love of writing, creativity, and the fact that I had been writing manuals at every job I had ever had because a poorly written manual drove me nuts. It wasn't even hard figuring out where I would go to college: Metropolitan State University (MSU) of Denver, which was close to our house and had a degree program in technical communication.

What was hard was everything after that.

Brain Switch

One of the biggest culture shocks of my return to college was dealing with my age versus the age of the other students. Even though MSU Denver supports a large nontraditional student population, in many of my classes I was one of the oldest or close-to-oldest student.

I quickly realized that, while I felt mature and independent, I had never felt like an "adult." Now, surrounded by younger students, I found my brain constantly switching between feeling like 18-year-old me, going to college for the first time, and someone who had lived 36 years on this earth. I found myself switching back and forth between the confident, self-assured person I had grown to be and the awkward, self-conscious teenager I had been. It made me question who I was as an adult and how I felt about that fact. I struggled with feeling that I had wasted the last 20 years of my life versus feeling proud that I was pursuing this huge goal. I struggled with acting my age while feeling like I'd somehow gone back in time.

Another brain switch was being taught by people barely older than I was (or even younger). It was (and still is) hard not to measure myself against them or to judge my life against their accomplishments.

I had to remember that my journey was my journey, not anyone else's. I had to be proud of myself and what I was accomplishing. I had goals, and I was going to make them happen. The struggles are still there, but they are diminishing. I've made a lot of friends and figured out more of who I am. Age isn't as big a deal as I thought it was when I first went back to school.

Academic Life

Switching to academic life was easier than the social part. I have always loved reading, writing, and studying.

What surprised me was the difference from what I had experienced in college before. Unlike my earlier experience, most of my professors worked either full or part time in a technical profession other than teaching. Classes taught up-to-date subjects and skills, like working with industry-standard software and producing portfolio pieces that mimicked projects I would create in my career. They also offered classes in skills that I had always wanted to acquire, like scriptwriting, video production, web design, and so many others. This switch from outdated classes taught by people who had never worked in the field to a far more practical approach shifted my school experience from one of dread to one of excitement.

Academic Upheaval

After my first year at MSU Denver, the Technical Communication Department completely switched its name and degree curriculum (it's now called Journalism and Media Production). While I could still graduate under the old degree program, a whole new hurricane of headaches was headed my way:

- New prefixes for old classes
- Technology glitches that meant the old program didn't understand the new coding system
- Old classes that weren't being offered anymore
- Classes that were absorbed into other classes
- New classes that I wanted to take that weren't included in my older degree catalog

During this upheaval, a lot of classes were being taught by new teachers or were being reworked as I was taking the class. Syllabi meant nothing, which was frustrating for me, as I liked being able to plan the semester. Yet I rose to the challenges of changing schedules, communicating with professors, and spontaneous assignments and projects.

All this means a lot of haunting my advisor's office, double-checking that I'm taking the right classes and that I will graduate on time, and working with the administration to get class substitutions approved. But even though it's aggravating, it's satisfying because I know exactly what I'm taking, and I'm taking the classes I want to take. This is my degree, all the way.

Honors

I debated a lot about going into the Honors program. There were reasons not to—I didn't need to do it for my degree, it would take more time to get out of school, and I would spend more tuition money—but in the end, I made the decision to join for two reasons: The Honors house was a quiet place to study, and I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it.

I have never regretted going into Honors. It has pushed me to question labels and boundaries, both personally and professionally. It has challenged me academically. It has taught me that I am not just a writer or a person behind a screen. I have a voice.

Next spring, I hope to stand up in front of a crowd of people and present my senior thesis on how technical writing reflects our culture and what future societies will think of our culture from our current technical documents. This thought paralyzes me, as I suffer from

extreme stage fright, but I am pushing myself to do it. I want to stand there for all the people who think they are too old to go back to school or follow their dreams. I want to stand there for all the technical writers who feel like they don't have a place in academia or the sciences. Mostly, I want to stand there for myself because if I can push myself to do that, nothing else can stop me.

The End?

For anyone thinking about going back to school, here are four lessons I've learned on my journey:

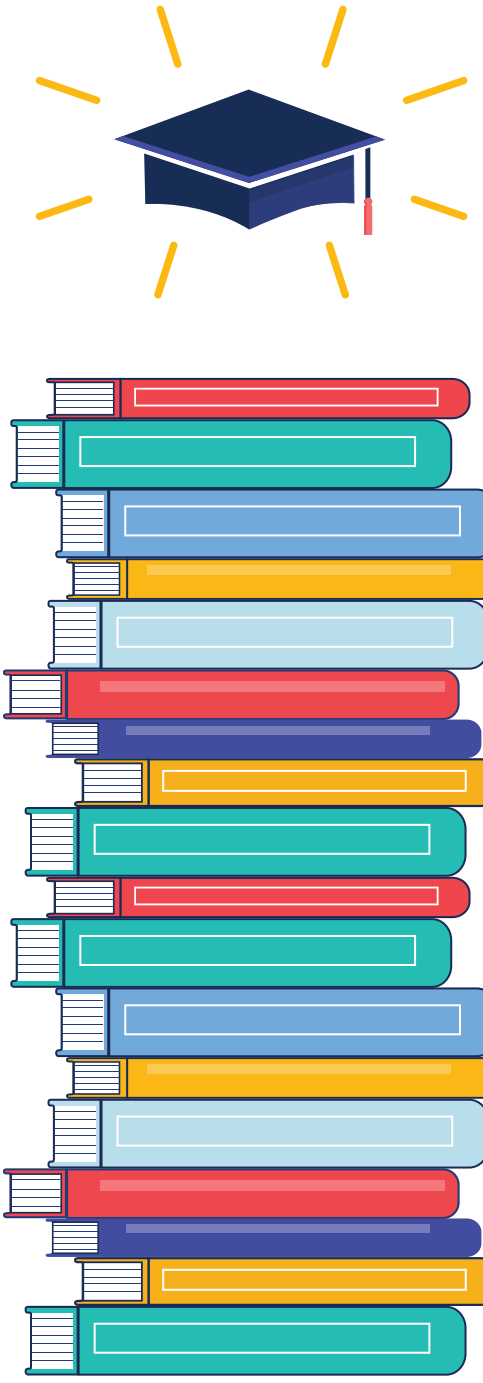
- You will get over the culture shock. Don't worry about what other people think because you are doing this for your own reasons.
- Don't just check out the college. Check out who the professors are and what they are teaching. Look for professors who are actively working in the field and for classes that teach practical skills.
- Get to be friends with your advisor, and don't be afraid to ask questions. This is your degree and you deserve to get the most out of your time.
- Tell the doubts to shut up. You can do this.

Going back to school has given me a chance to jump-start my career—from MSU Denver giving me the chance to attend the STC conference in May 2019, where I got to network with others in my chosen field, to providing me with an online professional portfolio service, to just allowing me the opportunity to get the bachelor's degree I needed to get my foot in the door. But more than all of that, going back to school gave me the chance to prove to myself that I am not my failures. I can do whatever I set my mind to, and I can have the life and career I've dreamed of.

This journey has been possible because of my amazing boyfriend, who encouraged me to go back and supported me so that I didn't have to work and could concentrate on school. He puts up with the financial hardship and doing without luxuries. He also puts up with my long nights, stressed-out finals weeks, and ranting about everything from the inadequacies of administration and stale thinking to the technical difficulties of computer software. The brave man even volunteered to be my editor for all my papers, and he listens to me rattle on about art history and Greek poetry and technical ekphrasis and issues in technical writing.

There was a moment in my first semester when I thought of quitting. My chronic anxiety came back in full force, and for a moment I wondered what in the world I was doing. I was too old. I wasn't smart enough. Who was I to think I could get my degree and start my life over? But then my boyfriend looked at me and smiled that smile that makes me feel like the most beautiful, smart, amazing woman in the world. I told all my worries and doubts to shut up because I was going to do this—for me, for him, and for the life we want together. I was going to work past all the emotional, physical, and mental blocks and finally get my bachelor's degree after all these years—and that's exactly what's going to happen in May 2021.

LIZ JEFFRIES *(ejeffri1@msudenver.edu) is a full-time student at Metropolitan State University of Denver, studying technical communication with a concentration in technical writing and editing. She grew up on a farm in Iowa and now lives in Westminster, Colorado, with her boyfriend. In her free time, she enjoys riding horses and competing with her boyfriend in observed trials motorcycle events.*



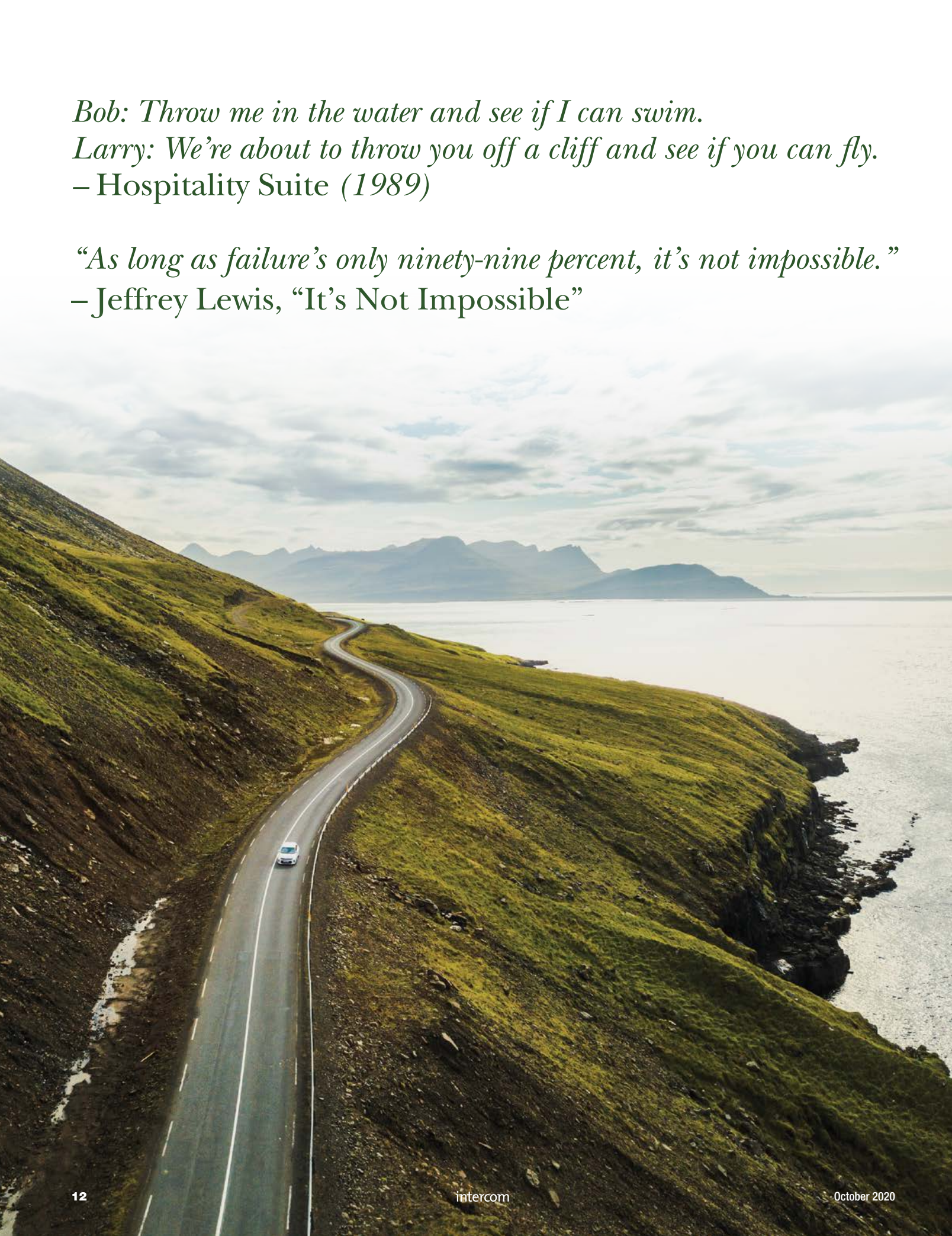
Still Growing

A LONG JOURNEY INTO TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

By JONAH SCHWARTZ | *STC New Professional Member*

Bob: Throw me in the water and see if I can swim.
Larry: We're about to throw you off a cliff and see if you can fly.
– Hospitality Suite *(1989)*

"As long as failure's only ninety-nine percent, it's not impossible."
– Jeffrey Lewis, "It's Not Impossible"



MY UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE was unpleasant. After nearly four years of loneliness, failure, and ennui, I settled as an English major with a concentration in film studies. Though I enjoyed it and did well, I wasn't thinking long term about my future. I could have studied technical writing, but I misunderstood what it was and was looking for the easy way out. I regretted this immediately upon graduation and carried that for 10 years.

I had been inculcated into presupposing that I would be venerated for vaunting my palmary and loquacious argot. Technical writing is the opposite. Praise is earned for simple, concise, plain language, and I soon realized that I am well-suited for this field, as it dovetails with my constitution, interests, and how I process information. I've always enjoyed explaining things to others because it enables me to better understand that content while helping others accomplish their goals. I crave structure, and technical writing provides rules, requirements, and deadlines, but within that is flexibility for creative solutions and problem-solving beyond putting words on a page.

I spent a decade working retail but maintained a growing interest in the field. At work, I marveled at the instructions and assembly manuals of the products we sold, store signage (wording, colors, typeface, readability), the design and language of the legally mandated posters of our rights and policies, SOP manuals, the design and scripting of training materials, store circulars, and the instructions on first aid kit sundries, to name a few. In my free time, I participated in usability testing and focus groups. I was, and am, fascinated by the research and design process of those studies. As a visual learner, the history and myriad data visualizations and table layouts have always captivated me. I've always been curious about the industry and international standards, from ISO and UL certifications to how icons like the power symbol or the ubiquitous indicator lights in a car are developed and enforced.

Someone had to produce those materials and make those decisions, and I hoped to one day be that person or on that team, but I didn't know how to proceed or enter the field. I took great pride that I was surviving on my own, but I felt resigned to retail and shelved the dream.

The universe tilted in 2013, and I moved from New York to North Carolina to help take care of a dying family member—a compromise that came with financial support to go back to school to hopefully land a job in the field. This gift and rare opportunity meant uprooting my life and surrendering all the comforts and independence I had built on my own; it also meant that, if I said no, I would never be allowed to complain about anything again.

Earning an Advanced Degree

So began my adventure into the wild world of advanced degrees. I spent the first year as a caregiver, not working, while waiting for enough time to pass to claim in-state residency. Geographic and logistical constraints limited my choice of schools and programs, which were further restricted by my exclusively retail work history and a GPA that was both outdated and low. In 2015, I enrolled at East Carolina University (ECU) and was admitted as a conditional student because of my limiting background. I also have dyslexia, dyscalculia, and ADD, which present their own set of challenges, but the program was online and allowed me to work at my own pace. While face-to-face interaction is preferable, this format worked well for me. I graduated two years later with a 4.0 GPA and several top-notch portfolio pieces. My professors were dedicated, encouraging, and supportive, but they were also lifelines and bridges to careers and colleagues who, in turn, are bridges to more of those. This is not to say you need a master's to enter the field, but I don't think I would be here without it.

Among my classes was Document Design, where I created powerful portfolio pieces, such as a printed and bound travel guide for introverts, and illustrated and written guidelines for a wave-making machine based on ambiguously worded design requirements. In another class, I was the team lead for creating a content strategy for a local nonprofit. In another, I researched and sought private grant funding for a different nonprofit. There was a class on the methodologies and design of research experiments and one on ethical issues within technical communication.

I walked away with sharpened skills on how to think like a technical writer, research and gather information (which is half of technical writing), and understand how and why different layouts work for different audiences and user needs. The coursework was grounded in theory and is necessary for success, but it lacked exposure to the applications widely used in the industry, such as MadCap Flare, DITA, oXygen, RoboHelp, FrameMaker, HTML, and CSS. Not every job uses those tools, but I was unprepared and shocked when I discovered these gaps in my education. This is why joining STC and a local community (in my case, STC Carolina) is invaluable.

The Importance of Professional Associations

I quickly discovered that STC membership connected me with professors and industry professionals (sometimes they're the same person) from corporations and nonprofits, both big and small. I gained access to webinars, industry-leading publications, training, and workshops on every topic of career development, from software skills to expanding my network to resume writing. Resources provided by STC will be valuable no matter where I am in my career.

In my first semester, I attended an STC Carolina talk on transitioning from school to industry and became a member shortly thereafter. I began volunteering for STC Carolina by attending and helping facilitate award ceremonies, meet-n-greets, lunch-n-learns, and

mentoring sessions. I soon joined the Administrative Council, where I served for three years, first as the Programs Director, then as Communication Chair, where I gained important experience in tech writing, leadership, and administrative work, including:

- Organizing events
- Conducting and analyzing surveys
- Redesigning business cards
- Writing blogs
- Creating event fliers
- Developing process and SOP documentation for incoming council members
- Delegating communication duties to our blog team
- Writing and distributing a monthly newsletter

We also rebuilt our website from scratch, and it was exhilarating to be involved in every step, from ideation to implementation. We did it all:

- Brainstorming on dry erase boards
- Drafting wireframe designs, card sorts
- Filling walls with colorful sticky notes
- Creating user personas
- Meeting to discuss typeface and color usage
- Reporting bugs
- Conducting usability tests

These efforts led, and continue to lead, us to winning STC awards, which are internationally recognized for their prestige and excellence. It is rewarding to be part of a team that creates meaningful value for our community while building confidence, experience, and satisfaction. And I have the portfolio pieces to show for my efforts.

Every touchpoint, no matter how banal, has value if you use it correctly. Wikipedia's citations can lead you to primary sources. You can obtain free software and downloadable trials of that aforementioned software. LinkedIn, YouTube, Reddit, Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and specialized message boards connect you with discussions, people, and resources that can help you break into the field, acquire or strengthen skills, and troubleshoot. There is a nearly infinite supply of technical writing books, e-books, audiobooks, and podcasts. STC helped me contextualize and orient myself within the overwhelming abundance of resources while learning how to network in person and online and while picking up actionable knowledge about how to succeed in the industry.

The Bridge Between Academia and Industry

Early in my program, in 2015, I attended Michael Albers' Symposium on Communicating Complex Information (SCCI) and met many from academia and industry with whom I still maintain contact. In 2017 (and again in 2019), I presented a poster at SCCI on the impact of data visualization colors on multicultural audiences. This also helped expand my network and gain exposure to research in the field.

In 2016, one of the SCCI attendees, Lisa Melançon, encouraged me to enter STC's International Student Infographic contest. I won. It was my first foray into the field, I was already making waves, and I made a big enough splash to be interviewed in the school newspaper. ECU flew me to the STC Summit in Anaheim, California, that year to collect the award. Whether in school, STC, SCCI, or other conferences and groups, it's heartening to be surrounded by like-minded, passionate professionals and students from disparate backgrounds who share the same goals and interests. Technical communicators are used in every field and capacity. Translation experts, web designers, engineers, professors, publishers, software engineers, videographers, and so forth—all in the same room with the same passion, same mission, happily accepting new ideas, perspectives, and fresh faces into their fold. I suggest you look for conferences and events in your area.

Entering the Workforce

While accepting my award in Anaheim, I was offered a three-month internship that I had applied to months earlier for one of my ECU classes. I was let go after just four days because of internal challenges; however, I had to work 140 hours to earn the credits, so the company graciously let me stay long enough to meet that threshold. I maintained seriousness, excitement, and high productivity with a positive attitude because I was finally a technical writer! I relished every quirk and nuance of the experience, right down to my squeaky chair. I produced onboarding documentation from written requirements, and I was given free rein to assemble it in the way that I thought was most effective. I also updated legacy documentation to match current formatting standards, and I created job ads and knowledge base articles for field workers. My hope was that, despite knowing I would soon be let go, they would want to find a place for me after seeing my output and the value I added. While that didn't happen, I left on good terms with respectable, physical portfolio pieces that led directly to opportunities later. It was a good experience that primed me and set the bar of expectations for future experiences.

I graduated, and *Intercom* published an article on my work on data visualization colors—my proudest portfolio piece. I continued to volunteer with STC Carolina on the Admin Council while I braved the job search process for two agonizing years. I was finally hired as a contract technical writer for the state, functioning in various capacities in program and project support. I believe that the work I did during the internship is what impressed them the most.

How My Experience Connected to My Work (or What to Expect)

As a contract technical writer, I produced several internal documentation and policy guidelines, ran many meetings, and worked on cross-functional teams. Much of my work was adjacent to writing, such as gathering and organizing information and producing program, project, and policy documentation. I helped develop a migration plan for the risk management team, was a scribe at status meetings, and posted minutes and summaries on SharePoint. I also led a monthly interstate meeting, where I gathered and reported on information-sharing requests and status updates. I had to know where or how to find information and report it competently and efficiently. When people recognize your skills and dedication on one project, you're often brought onto others, and you learn as you go. Thus, I was asked to research the Section 508 requirements for our web-based training, and I became something of a subject matter expert on the topic. It was surreal to be brought into a meeting and speak authoritatively on a topic. There was also a delicate balance between giving and receiving feedback because everyone responds to criticism differently, and you always want to be sensitive and cognizant of those needs.

I think of myself as a user advocate: caring and empathetic. Technical writing requires this because effective and accessible content must consider the individual and cultural needs of all readers, and user bases are always changing. Creative writing is about the author; technical writing is about the audience.

I overcame and accommodated my learning disabilities by forging strong relationships with managers and coworkers who were patient because they knew the quality of my work. I wasn't afraid to ask questions, and I knew where to pace myself. I spent more time on projects that I knew would take longer and more quickly wrapped up those that I knew I could handle. So—and I say this as a card-carrying pessimist—*it's not too late for you.* I'd argue that *everybody* is a technical communicator because we all want ourselves and our work to be understood and received as intended. School and STC merely made me more effective at that, relying on research and best practices, not intuition and guesswork.

COVID-19 and Current Impacts

About a year and a half and three contract renewals later, the state job was cut short due to budgetary issues. Then COVID-19 hit. As of this writing, I'm still in transition to my next adventure and am looking for any contract or full-time opportunities in the field. I remain alert as I crest this hill, still looking forward while I apply and interview. It's a slow, often painful process, but I cannot undervalue the power of networking and STC membership.

Conclusion and Key Takeaways

There are two morals to this story. I've met people—some from STC—who helped me when I felt like I had no gas left in my tank, but I also admit with shame and embarrassment that I squandered some opportunities, either out of fear of success, fear of failure, bad timing, or whatever other poor excuses I had at the time, hurting relationships and my potential. Those missed opportunities bit me later. I have seen this happen to others as well, and it doesn't help anybody, so now I try to take every opportunity I can because I don't know when those things will be useful.

Secondly, I strive to treat *everything* I do with grace, pride, and effort. I cannot know when or if what I've done will be meaningful for someone else. That is not a decision for me to make. Something I dismissed as meritless may be exactly what someone else is looking for, and I never know when that moment will come.

I wish you luck and success. Remember that perfection is not a destination; it's a process.

Update

In December 2020—on the week of my 39th birthday and after an exhausting year of unemployment—I was offered a new role with the state, in a higher position with more responsibility. I don't take this lightly, and I am grateful for the opportunity, but I am excited for the continued adventure.

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Internship Insights

from Summer Interns at National Instruments

By OMAR MELHEM, PATRICK BEHRENS, AND KATIE TIGHE

Omar Melhem

How did your internship experience inform your understanding of technical communication workspaces?

"Technical communication" now has an expanded meaning to me. While I originally pictured communication with an audience, I've also come to realize just how much of the communication is with my team, too. Working entirely online was a new challenge, but it matured the way I work by encouraging me to stay as connected as possible. Communication became my paramount tool. By focusing on communication as much as I could, I was delighted to collaborate so closely with a variety of people at National Instruments (NI) all over the world, each with unique skills and experiences that they shared with me. I now have a deeper love for communication and staying connected to such a supportive and energizing workspace.

How did the technical communication internship shape your career trajectory?

I want technical communication and writing to be a critical part of my future endeavors. My goal is technology research, and I believe anything I do will be most meaningful and inspirational when I am able to write about it. I don't only want to be a researcher—I want to be an author, as well. I am now certain that no matter what I end up doing, I must be able to author my own work to make my future accomplishments as influential as possible.

What did the company do to turn the internship into a valuable experience for you?

As an employee, I learned that NI excels in all forms of communication. Whether I was working with managers, developers, or other writers, any question I had was immediately met with guidance. I was granted insight into a wide range of skills, such as how to best tackle technological problems, collaborate with developers, or improve my overall technical writing skills. With the support of more experienced NI employees willing to share their knowledge with me, there was no challenge I could not overcome, ensuring a valuable and insightful summer experience with the company.

What skills did you learn during this internship that shaped your understanding of technical communication workspaces and the workplace in general?

I already knew how to explain concepts that I understand, but during this internship I also had to practice explaining what I *don't* understand. I was the most recent addition to the team, completely new to concepts that everyone else had known for years. I was freshly exposed to software and tools that used coding languages I had never touched before. To create documentation, I had to consult developers and content experts about features that I didn't know existed until five minutes prior. It was challenging to ask *meaningful* questions about new concepts because I didn't have enough understanding about what would be *meaningful* to know. To get the information that I needed, I had to help others help me, learning the skill of being very precise about my needs so that I could receive the best support possible. Just saying "I don't know" didn't cut it—I needed to be more descriptive and say, "I don't know *this*." The ability to communicate in this way let me integrate myself into the dynamic workplace as a new team member.

What would you consider the most valuable experience of your internship so far?

My most valuable experience was the challenge. My goal is always growth so that I can make the biggest impact possible, and I believe I grow best when I have the *inspiration* for growth: challenge. I took this internship at NI because I wanted these positive challenges, and I received exactly what I came for. Any time I was faced a struggle, whether it was a difficult task, an error I made, or an unexpected complication, I had to push myself to reach out, learn new information, adjust my strategies, and ultimately grow so that I am more readily equipped for the future.

Patrick Behrens

How did your internship experience inform your understanding of technical communication workspaces?

Since the NI internship took place online, I had to think about how I presented myself digitally. I had to not only apply my technical communication knowledge to the content I created but also to my day-to-day interaction with my peers. I realized that I took a lot for granted in face-to-face communication. I had to ensure my language was concise and clear to communicate my thoughts effectively.

How did the technical communication internship shape your career trajectory?

My internship at NI opened my eyes to the flexibility of technical communication as a career. Technical communication does not necessitate being in the same location as colleagues. I always thought I'd end up in an office; working remotely, however, worked just as well

(if not better) than working in an office. I found a lot of confidence in my abilities as a technical writer. I know I have places I need to grow (especially when it comes to learning how to communicate virtually), but NI gave me the energy and impetus to hone my craft.

What did the company do to turn the internship into a valuable experience for you?

NI did an amazing job at making interns feel welcome. I worked directly with my team. I was not just an intern; I had actual responsibilities. My documentation was not a menial task. My work was being published alongside my colleagues' work in company documentation. I had full access to all the technology and experiences that my regular coworkers had. All of this made me feel like my efforts were valued. I felt like I mattered.

What skills did you learn during this internship that shaped your understanding of technical communication workspaces and the workplace in general?

I had to adapt quickly when I started the NI internship. Attending classes at my university virtually is one thing; however, working in a virtual office space is different. I had to figure out how to interact with those around me. I was not in a place with my peers. I was working in a company where I was actively reporting to others, where I had deadlines that were not just essays.

What would you consider the most valuable experience of your internship so far?

I thoroughly enjoyed working on my overall project. I gained a lot of confidence from the freedom I had when I was doing my work. I had to talk to subject matter experts and developers frequently. The more I spoke with them, the more confident I grew in my abilities and knowledge.

Insights about NI Internships from Recruiter Katie Tighe

Technical communication internships are a great way to learn new skills and put skills learned in the classroom to the test in the real world. Many students wonder how to maximize their chances of getting an internship in this field, and while there is no one-size-fits-all answer, technical writing recruiters at NI have several tips for students who are interested in spending their summer with us.

Technical writing is a challenging job, and two writers at our company could work on vastly different projects in different toolchains. Additionally, deadlines, stakeholders, and scope are constantly changing for many of our projects at NI. Therefore, flexibility and adaptability are key skills for success, and we look for evidence of these traits in candidates who apply to our technical writing internship.

We also want to see evidence of attention to detail. Students can demonstrate this in their written application materials, editing test, and interview. Excellent writing and editing skills are an obvious prerequisite for any effective technical writer, but we also look for curiosity, willingness to learn, and the ability to ask insightful questions. Successful candidates can give and receive feedback with grace and can demonstrate initiative, teamwork, interest in technology, and interest in our company. Prior experience with markup or programming languages, writing and publishing tools, or content management systems is helpful but not required.

We evaluate applications holistically, so we encourage anyone who is wondering if their experience meets all of our requirements to think creatively about how to best highlight their skill set. Being in a technical communication program is a great start, but it is by no means the only indicator we look at—we hire students from all degree programs as long as they have the requisite skills. Our team consists of professionals from a wide variety of backgrounds who can articulate how their abilities translate to technical writing. Applicants should gather concrete evidence of projects they have completed, teams they have worked on, classes they have taken, or jobs they have held that would be relevant to a technical writing role.

At NI, we want interns to be exposed to the full range of experiences that a full-time technical writer would have, and this goes beyond working with subject matter experts to write and edit content. We also give them the opportunity to plan and manage projects, provide and receive peer feedback, and get involved in extracurricular activities like volunteering in the community.

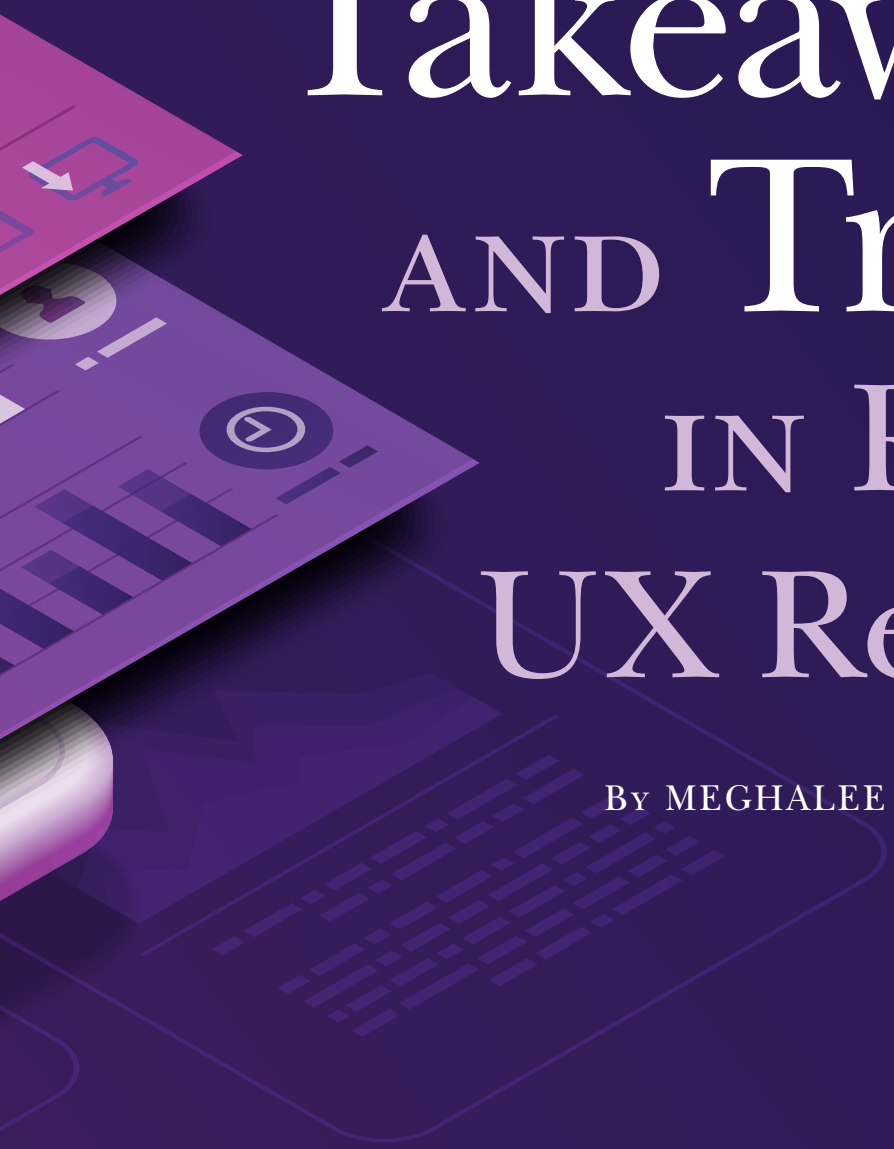
We value our interns and the fresh insight that they bring to our teams and our work. We give them real projects and expose them to as much real-world experience as possible. Technical writing interns at NI have overhauled documentation sets, written new documents from scratch, evaluated and addressed content gaps, and more. We want to equip them with skills that they can carry over into the rest of their coursework and careers, and in return, their impact on NI lasts well beyond the summer.

OMAR MELHEM

PATRICK BEHRENS

KATIE TIGHE *(katie.tighe@ttu.edu) is a staff technical writer at NI, where she authors system documentation for transportation and semiconductor test applications. She is also a technical communication master's student at Texas Tech University. Her research interests include editing, technical writing, organizational communication, and user-centered design.*

Key Takeaways and Trends in Remote UX Research



By MEGHALEE DAS | *STC Student Member*

REMOTE USER RESEARCH and usability testing is an integral part of user experience (UX) research. With the wide availability of testing and video conferencing tools that allow researchers to create moderated or unmoderated tests, remote research methods have become increasingly popular in the UX field among industry practitioners as well as graduate students like myself.

While in-person UX research is recommended by usability experts, such as Jakob Nielsen, to get a better understanding of user ecologies and build rapport with participants, there are many situations where remote methods are preferred to gather user data and test UX. Such circumstances could be due to intentional choices, such as following a tight budget, convenience, testing participants in a different geographical location, etc. Alternatively, those circumstances could be due to unprecedented events like the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in social distancing rules, travel bans, temporary or indefinite work-from-home decisions, and cancellation of on-site classes in higher education, thereby restricting in-person research.

Irrespective of the reason behind remote UX research, it is imperative that technical communicators and UX researchers in the industry and academia are responsive to the changing environment. In this article, I draw on my experience as a graduate student conducting remote UX research with the testing tool Loop11, and I present takeaways in five key areas of interest: flexibility in planning, budget considerations, remote research and testing methods, uncertainties and challenges, and opportunities. These takeaways can help industry practitioners, as well as current graduate students of technical communication and those transitioning to UX jobs, tackle issues associated with remote UX research and anticipate trends that can inform their practices.

Flexibility in Planning

In spring 2020, as part of a UX class assignment, I analyzed the experience of international patrons of the university library. I conducted initial research through interviews, site visits, user journey maps, and paper prototypes of the library website. Based on these research results, I developed an in-person usability test plan.

When the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic and social distancing rules were enforced, however, I had to be flexible. I quickly modified my research goals and created a remote test plan to replace the original in-person usability test.

As mentioned earlier, remote testing can be by choice or due to a lack of options. Fields where one could have difficulty conducting in-person research in the current environment include health sciences, fitness products, food, travel, education, and hospitality industries. No matter the circumstances, technical communicators and UX researchers in academia and the industry need to be agile and adaptable to changes.

Flexibility when planning a research project helps to navigate any unexpected challenges and gain realistic insights into UX. How can UX researchers cultivate flexibility? Flexibility or adaptability is a mindset; researchers must be willing to let go of rigidity in goals and methods, and realize that a fixed response to any developing situation will stall the project instead of benefiting it. Also, researchers need to do some legwork to understand the user environment and behavior, and to determine if the participant will be able to access a remote test if the original plan is modified.

Flexibility should also be extended to users in the way that they are treated during the test, such as giving them extra time to understand the tools, treating them with empathy, and acknowledging that they might be in unusual workspaces, facing anxieties, experiencing disruptions due to Internet issues, or caring for children. To better understand and adapt to the circumstances of my participants, I sent them a survey to gauge their technical proficiency, website use behavior, and access to the Internet. I explored remote testing tools through UX research forums, selected Loop11 as my testing tool, and created a moderated, remote testing plan. In this way, I was able to join the users online during the test and help assuage any concerns they had about the technology or the test itself. Because my users had varying linguistic and technical proficiency, my presence helped them feel more comfortable during the test.

Such flexibility in different aspects of the test plan, as well as in the way that participants are treated, can help technical communicators be responsive to any changing circumstances without compromising the quality of research.

Budget Considerations

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the economy, and in June 2020 the US National Bureau of Economic Research officially declared that the US economy was in a recession. While there has been a slight improvement in US employment numbers at the time of this writing, industries across all sectors, including UX, continue to be volatile and could be facing shrinking budgets.

In an industry like UX, where projects can stretch over long periods and include participants across geographical boundaries—requiring extensive funding for recruitment, testing, and compensation—financial resources for research might be tight due to the current economic situation. In-person UX research usually costs more, but moving things online can also be expensive if advanced testing tools are used. In such circumstances, discount usability and lean UX approaches might be more feasible, as they use fewer participants and focus on specific issues that improve UX.

To get better access to users who fit the budget, researchers can use online participant recruiting services with varying fee structures and turnaround times. Student researchers usually recruit representative users from a small pool of participants within their personal network, and there is nominal or no compensation due to limited funding.

My only expense was purchasing coffee gift cards, and as I used the testing tool Loop11 during the trial period, I did not have to pay for it. I do plan to replicate this study, however, and therefore need to take testing expenses into consideration.

There are some tools, such as Userlytics, which have offered discounts due to disruptions caused by COVID-19, and researchers can explore which companies are currently offering free trials and affordable pricing plans. These measures help UX research practitioners, as well as student researchers, lower the cost of testing and compensation when facing reduced funding due to budget cuts in their respective organizations.

Remote Research and Testing Methods

In the first Virtual UX Conference hosted by the Nielsen Norman Group in April 2020, Jakob Nielsen said UX cannot be 100% remote if a researcher wants to generate deeper understanding and insights, but he acknowledged that in current circumstances and in the short term, some aspects of UX research, like usability studies, collaboration, and design, can be done remotely. He said, "User research is better in person … [but] if you have already done it, you have built up a kind of understanding of users; you draw from that bank and use that to interpret these somewhat weaker things that we can do right now." This section addresses some of those challenges by describing contextual inquiry alternatives, diary studies, and remote testing and collaboration methods.

Contextual Inquiry Alternatives

One of the biggest problems that remote UX researchers face, especially at a time of social distancing, is the inability to conduct contextual inquiry through direct observational methods like site visits, shadowing, and fly-on-the-wall techniques. While in-person field studies cannot be completely replaced, researchers can use other methods of varying complexity, ranging from data analysis to self-reporting. These techniques are triangulated to determine recurring patterns, gaps, and issues users face.

In a 2018 *Intercom* article, Kumar Dhanagopal, a Consulting User-Assistance Developer at Oracle America, did a comparative analysis of methods to understand users on the basis of reliability and availability of sources. He found user forums, technical support teams, and internal experts of organizations to be the most reliable and easily available sources, and content analytics and research reports to be least reliable but most easily accessible. Remote UX researchers can use alternative methods like these to tackle travel, budget, and time restrictions.

Diary Studies

Diary studies reveal how users interact with a product or website over a period of time. Although they fall under self-reporting methods, such as surveys, focus groups, and interviews, they can be adapted into an audiovisual form of think-aloud protocol.

To give a rich description of their environment, the various steps involved in performing tasks, as well as their cognitive and emotional states, test participants can create electronic submissions of work logs, brief narratives, or snippets of tasks—and combine them with photographs or videos taken on phones, tablets, or digital or wearable cameras—to narrate what they are doing, similar to think-aloud protocol. These entries can be sent in real time or at a later time to describe user activities and ecology, and the data can be observed by UX researchers to perform environment and task analyses.

Diary studies are most useful when trying to understand long-term user habits, behavior patterns, user environments, and user journeys, and they might be particularly useful to researchers in remote settings who can't be physically present with their participants.

Moderated and Unmoderated Remote Testing Tools and Videoconferencing Sites

There are multiple remote testing tools that can be used to evaluate UX with websites, prototypes, and apps (see "Tools and Resources for Remote UX Research" for a sample).

Loop11 allowed me to choose between moderated and unmoderated remote testing, and it provided an extensive list of usability metrics to measure efficiency (task completion rate, average page views, average time spent), learnability (heat maps, participant path analysis), errors, and satisfaction (System Usability Scale).

Because I created a moderated test plan, I could talk to my participants online during the test and monitor their performance in real time. I could also later revisit the audio and video recordings, as well as my time-stamped notes, to verify my observations.

Morae is another popular remote testing software application that offers functions similar to Loop11 and records on-screen activity, mouse clicks, keystrokes, audio, and video. Researchers can choose to run a moderated test or an unmoderated test by using Morae's AutoPilot feature, which automates the test session and saves valuable human resources and time.

Besides remote-testing tools like Loop11 and Morae that have embedded recording and screen capture, researchers can also use video conferencing sites that have screen share and recording options, such as Zoom, to conduct moderated, remote usability tests. Researchers can take notes in real time and manually calculate user metrics while observing the participants and their screen. These videoconferencing websites are free and can be useful when spending on advanced remote testing tools is not an option. It is especially helpful for graduate student researchers, who might already have a Zoom or similar videoconferencing account for their classes.

Collaboration

Remote collaboration is not new. In a 2016 survey by the Nielsen Norman Group, 82% of the 86 UX professionals surveyed said they collaborated with others at varying levels. UX researchers use file sharing tools like SharePoint, Google Drive, and Dropbox; videoconferencing tools like Zoom and WebEx; design collaboration tools like Figma; and group collaboration tools like Slack and Microsoft Teams to generate ideas, iterate with team members, distribute workload, and uncover blind spots. Just like testing, collaboration can also be synchronous or asynchronous, and I expect the trend of companies adopting and expanding tools for remote collaboration to continue to accelerate.

Uncertainties and Challenges

In remote UX research, it's not always clear how remote methods will affect participants and results due to less control over the user environment. Moreover, the loss of control is not just with the user environment but also the tester's workspace. According to a study conducted on UX practitioners by user research platform EnjoyHQ, 40% of 215 participants were not working remotely before the COVID-19 crisis, and 21% were struggling to balance parenting and work. With a growing trend of extending work-from-home policies, or even making them permanent, UX researchers face a blurring of their professional and personal space, which leads to additional labor, such as managing children, dealing with faulty Internet connections, and learning new conferencing, collaboration, and testing tools. This is exacerbated by the anxiety of potential layoffs and the lack of human contact with team members.

A remote test means both participant and researcher have to learn how to communicate using these tools and also make the interaction as natural as possible. If this is a multicultural project, there can be additional challenges, like cultural and linguistic differences, which make it difficult to elicit responses.

In my project, some participants never responded; one test failed because the Internet connection was too slow; and one user had to repeat the test because they got disconnected. Although I had conducted pilot tests to check the software and the final test plan, it is not possible to anticipate all possible issues.

As new graduates, young scholars, and professionals who are trying to establish their ethos, it is better to be overprepared and to overcommunicate. Create a backup plan for technology issues, such as alternative connection options; conduct pilot tests; and communicate clearly with the participant about software installation to alleviate some of the stress associated with the challenges of remote testing.

Opportunities

With the progress of information and communication technology, the world has become smaller and the UX research tool kit has expanded. Remote UX research will continue to open doors for increased collaboration between cultures and spaces which are physically distant.

This will be useful for academic and industry researchers who are interested in intercultural technical communication and multicultural UX. Instead of seeing travel bans and shrinking budgets as barriers, we can see remote research as an opportunity to learn new tools, grow the user base, and reflect on how we can make the most of this challenging situation and derive newer perspectives.

Virtual tests can help us reach a larger pool of participants we normally wouldn't have considered, and that could give us surprising insights. Many multinational companies with markets and offices in other parts of the world can come together to test products internationally. Besides testing and analysis, UX researchers can also present research online, either in the form of prerecorded videos or live presentations. Videoconferencing platforms like Zoom and GoToMeeting will likely be popular for synchronous online presentations, as will virtual whiteboard and visual collaboration tools like Google Draw, Microsoft Visio, Sketch, Mural, and Miro.

Nielsen says, based on current trends, the scope of many user bases is broadening. For example, more elderly people are using videoconferencing tools during social distancing to prevent isolation and stay in touch with their loved ones. There is limited data available, however, on the UX of senior citizens. As the target users of many products are expanding, Nielsen says, "those interfaces have to be simplified dramatically for the senior citizens to really use them well." This is a good opportunity for UX researchers to study elderly user behavior and design interfaces that take into consideration their UX, as well as to make more accessible products or explore new research areas.

Conclusion

Remote testing has become a preferred method for many UX researchers who have access to new technologies and testing tools. While there are unique changes happening in workspaces and new user ecologies due to social distancing rules, we are witnessing a significant shift to remote UX research, which is becoming more normalized. Researchers acknowledge the significance of human contact and in-person contextual inquiry but also realize the importance of being responsive to our environment and exploring the benefits and convenience of remote methods.

I believe remote UX research is here to stay, and the sooner researchers equip themselves with remote testing skills, the more successful they will be in continuing with their projects and understanding current UX.

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Tools and Resources for Remote UX Research

- **Remote UX testing:** Loop11, Morae, UsabilityHub, UXtweak, Maze, dscout, UserBob, UserTesting, Userlytics (discounted rates)
- **Videoconferencing:** Zoom, GoToMeeting, Cisco Webex, Skype, BlueJeans, Google Hangouts
- **Collaboration:** Microsoft Teams, Slack, Google Drive, EnjoyHQ, Figma (design)
- **Online participant recruitment:** Respondent, User Interviews, Validately, TestingTime, Ethnio
- **Activity and virtual whiteboard:** Google Draw, Microsoft Visio, Sketch, Mural, Miro

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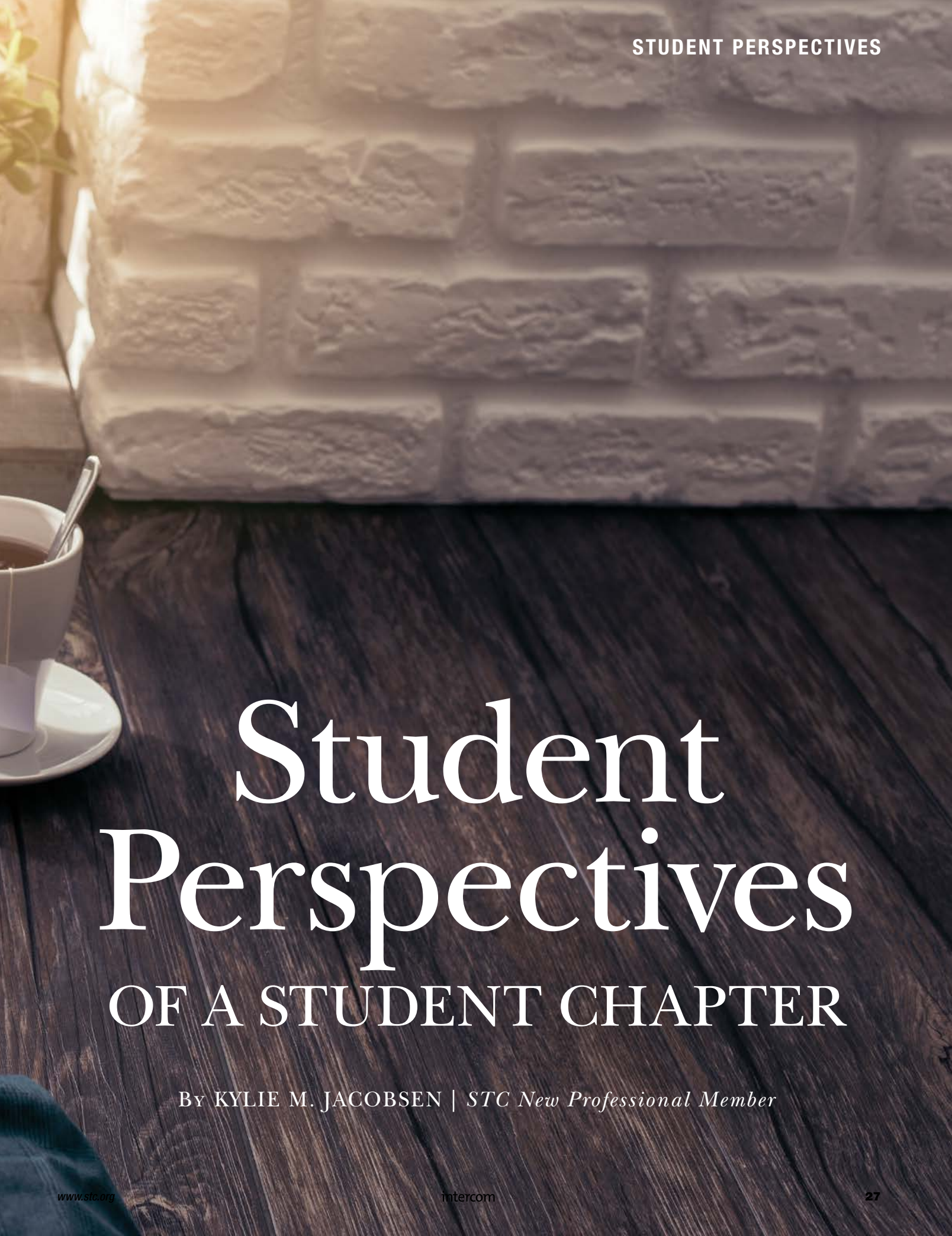

Student Perspectives

OF A STUDENT CHAPTER

By KYLIE M. JACOBSEN | *STC New Professional Member*

IN THIS ARTICLE, I want to share some ways that the Texas Tech University (TTU) STC Student Chapter overcame a few challenging years and pivoted toward more sustainable professional development. I want to share some of the things that made the TTU student chapter a successful professional student chapter so that new or small student chapters facing significant challenges in membership and programming might benefit. By providing a more detailed understanding of the operation of a student chapter, I hope to highlight some of the barriers that student chapters encounter and offer suggestions to professional STC communities looking to solicit more student membership into their chapters.

I first joined STC as a student chapter member at Iowa State University, then later at TTU. At TTU, the sometimes unexpected student turnover and changes in leadership resulted in a dip in programming and membership between 2005 and 2013. However, by 2017 the student chapter was awarded the Most Improved Community Award at the STC Summit for "an impressive increase in student outreach activities and quality education programs, as well as strengthened social media presence." The awarded certificate also stated, "STC's Texas Tech University Student Chapter clearly demonstrates a strong dedication to the development of future technical communicators." I am proud to say that I served as the student chapter President alongside a committed Executive Board that year.

Gaining Access to Resources: What to Do if Your Student Chapter Has a Small Membership

First, I want to recognize that the TTU student chapter was supported by faculty who mentored student members and leaders and advocated for the chapter within the English Department. Second, registering as a student organization with the university was instrumental in preserving the student chapter during some of the more challenging years due to the access to professional resources granted student organizations. Although many existing student chapters might find this information self-explanatory or even mandated by the university, some of the programming the TTU student chapter created (which was awarded an STC Pacesetter Award to recognize a successful chapter event that could be implemented by other chapters) resulted from support received from both STC and the university. A student chapter trying to start at a university should not overlook

this step. Reasons a student chapter should consider becoming a university student organization follow.

Funding the Student Chapter

Funding student chapter programming and recruitment events can be difficult because STC determines the financial support for the chapter according to the number of members in it. A student chapter with more STC members will receive more money to use for programming purposes than a smaller chapter. Student chapters will experience gains and dips in membership based on student enrollment at the university and on students' ability to pay the annual fees, but if a student chapter is also registered as a university student organization, there is potential to apply for university funding.

A registered student organization can often apply for university funding, which can be used for a variety of programmatic resources. The organization is, however, often given spending regulations. For example, student organization funding at TTU could be used toward speaker fees at an event but not toward refreshments for the attendees. The regulations for applying for university funding can be tedious and require annual or monthly training (for example, attending student government meetings), but university funding helped support TTU student chapter activities that were necessary to recruit new members when the student chapter's budget was tight due to low membership.

The work required to secure university funding also contributed to the professional development of student chapter leadership, which was required to prepare appropriate budgets. Eventually, the TTU student chapter no longer required university support, stopped requesting the funds, and was able to create a sustainable approach with the money received from STC.

Providing Space and Other Resources

Another benefit to applying for student organization status with the university is that student organizations are often allowed to use campus spaces for free. At TTU, the student organizations could use department resources but could also request community space around campus and in academic buildings. For example, meeting rooms for the student chapter Executive Committee could be scheduled with the department's building manager, and banquet spaces could be reserved in the university's student center without rental fees. Additional space, such as an office, could be requested as well.

Apart from space, other resources are available to student organizations. The TTU student chapter had access to Financial Planning Services to help with budgeting, a copier and printer for promotional material, centralized electronic bulletin board spaces to advertise programming, a storage locker, and a university mailbox, among other valuable resources for operating a chapter.

Before any TTU student organization can request to use university space or resources, representative student leaders are required to attend annual risk management training. This training resembled a professional conference, including daylong sessions on financial planning, leadership styles, risk documentation, and organizational management, which ultimately provided additional professional development for student chapter leadership.

Collaborating and Recruiting Opportunities

Lastly, I want to highlight the access to potential student STC members gained through proximity to other students engaged in professional groups on campus. During my time as a student member, I recall collaborating with other groups, such as the Black Graduate Student Association, the Graduate English Society, and the Technical Communication and Rhetoric Graduate Council.

Collaborating with graduate student groups often paired undergraduate STC members with graduate students who were already involved in professional spaces. In turn, our members often learned of internships or job opportunities in the community, and our chapter was able to establish a business relationship with represented companies. Plus, our chapter was able to recruit students from outside the technical communication degree program who might be interested in technical communication.

As a university-registered student organization, the STC Student Chapter at TTU was also invited to university events, like meet-and-greet networking sessions, which allowed leaders and representatives from all over campus to meet and exchange information so future collaboration could occur. For example, I met the president of the Graphic Design Club, who wanted to join our Web Design Committee. Our chapter was also able to participate in other events, such as Diversity Week—an annual event hosted by the university—during which we promoted STC and demonstrated how technical communication can benefit various workspaces through accessible and user-centered documents.

Showcasing the Student Members

After a few years of establishing consistent finances, resources, and recruitment, one of the successful professional development opportunities the TTU Student Chapter developed was the STC Spring Showcase. Each year, the showcase highlights projects that students enrolled in technical communication courses completed during the academic year. Participants explain how they applied their technical communication problem-solving skills in a variety of professional circumstances by

presenting their projects in a large conference room to collegiate and practitioner audiences.

At the STC Spring Showcase, a panel of expert judges used a rubric consisting of nine core technical communication competencies to select three students who most strongly demonstrated the competencies in their work. These students won small scholarships, which were sponsored by the university. Beyond the prizes, students were invited to network with other like-minded students in STC, engage with community professionals who attended, and learn more about spaces where they might find employment after graduation. Because the TTU student chapter is also a university-registered student organization, any student enrolled in technical communication courses was eligible to receive a monetary prize, as the funds came from the university, not STC. The TTU student chapter then recruited students from those who participated.

For this event, the chapter was awarded a Pacesetter Award for what the STC Community Achievement Award Committee described as an "engaging STC Spring Showcase initiative; and for uniting and supporting the profession, the Society, the chapter, and the students. Imaginative and well organized, the program adds audience participation to encourage engagement and generate excitement." The STC Spring Showcase was one of the most well-attended events in recent TTU student chapter history and resulted in a handful of new student members, some of whom were recruited and employed by prominent local tech companies.

Gaining Access to Students: What to Do if Your Professional Chapter Has a Small Student Membership

Professional STC communities that strive to recruit students or newly graduated professionals to their chapters should consider supporting student chapters to overcome some of the constraints of programming unique to the collegiate environment. A reciprocal relationship with student chapters might be built by taking one of the following steps.

Encourage a New or Existing Student Chapter to Register as an Official Student Organization with Its Associated University

The university's annual financial support can sustain a student chapter when its membership dips or is in the process of growing. Apart from financial support, the university can provide a variety of other valuable resources that can elevate the student experience (for free).

Inquire about Attending or Supporting a Student Chapter Event

The success of the STC Spring Showcase suggests that students are eager for professional feedback on their personal work, and this type of feedback makes the event rewarding for students. Added elements, like exchanging business cards, highlighting student work online, or sponsoring a small prize, increase an event's perceived benefit for students, as well. Students at these events might be viable job candidates looking for a new professional home and might also be receptive to an invitation to join the professional chapter.

There are only nine student chapters listed on the STC website, which might make it unrealistic to build a relationship with a student chapter nearby. However, there are over 150 university programs for technical communication, as listed in the STC Academic Database, so mentoring a student chapter or recruiting new graduates might be more feasible if one of the universities listed in the database is near your professional chapter.

As for me, a recently hired Assistant Professor of Writing, I am working within the constraints of policy changes made to accommodate face-to-face instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, and I have connected with a network of professionals and other STC chapters I met as a student chapter member to inquire about service learning assignments that can be completed remotely. I am eager to embrace these challenges and discover creative ways to continue teaching effective professional communication practices, which would not have been possible without my STC student membership.

KYLIE M. JACOBSEN *(jacokyli@gvsu.edu) has been a member of STC since 2012. She served as vice president for the TTU STC Student Chapter from 2015 to 2016, as president from 2016 to 2018, and on the Distinguished Chapter Service Award Committee in 2019. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Writing at Grand Valley State University, where she teaches courses in professional writing, business communication, writing for the web, and document design.*

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IN MEMORIAM
Donn DeBoard
16 January 1954 – 25 August 2020

BY DANIELLE VILLEGAS AND TIMOTHY ESPOSITO

EDITOR'S NOTE: ON 25 August 2020, STC Fellow and longtime member Donn DeBoard passed away. He was 66. I was saddened, as so many were, by Donn's passing, as he was an incredible STC colleague, friend, mentor, leader, and all-around sweet, fun person. I found these tributes to him so spot-on, fun, and even funny that I wanted to include them both and in the original first-person voices. I think Donn would be happy to be remembered so well.

From Danielle Villegas

Donn was one of the first people I became friends with in the STC. I had just finished attending my first STC-Philadelphia Mid-Atlantic Technical Communication Conference (now known as CONDUIT) back in 2013. I was very nervous about meeting new people at the post-conference social. When I arrived at the restaurant, however, I sat down next to a quiet, reserved, yet very friendly individual. He introduced himself as Donn DeBoard and started to put me at ease and pull me out of my shell. We chatted about our families—his daughter was just about to graduate from college, and he was rather proud of her accomplishments. He patiently listened to me tell him about how I had just restarted my career in technical communication and about raising my own son. That night, a friendship with Donn DeBoard was forged.

During my short friendship with Donn, I learned how passionate he was about technical communication—as much as I was. The trick was that he'd been doing it A LOT longer. I was among the proud attendees from Philadelphia who were able to see Donn receive his STC Fellow award. It was truly an honored moment for him! I had also gotten to know Donn for his work within our Philadelphia Metro Chapter (PMC) supporting the academic outreach program. During his tenure, he had built up incredible partnerships with local colleges and universities, but especially with Drexel, his alma mater, and was able to create a viable scholarship competition program for students. At the Society level, he was on the Nominating Committee, worked hard on the scholarship program, and presented at many local, regional, and international conferences. He was a force to be reckoned with!

The thing that I remember most about Donn was his joy and willingness to help out others in the field, which is probably why he gravitated toward students and new technical communicators. As I shared the news of his passing with others from STC-PMC who had worked with him, several said that he had helped them get a job in tech comm when they needed it most or that he was a fantastic mentor to them as they got started. He always jumped at the opportunity to serve as a mentor to many new professionals seeking guidance in this field. He was always curious, open to learning new things, and adapted with the times.

For me personally, he was a different kind of mentor. As I ascended the ranks of the chapter leadership, Donn was always available to lend an ear and give advice. His wisdom influenced many chapter leadership decisions. He

Figure 1. Donn receiving his Associate Fellow honor at the 2011 STC Summit.

was dedicated to protecting the chapter that he'd helped to build and maintain over the years. After dealing with some health issues, Donn came back after a sabbatical from the PMC council to help with rebuilding our chapter and ran for the role of Secretary/Treasurer. We were so happy to have him back in the fold as we kicked off our program year. Alas, he was unable to see the changes going forward with his passing.

Everyone I've spoken to since passing along the news of his death has said the same thing: Donn was one of the nicest people you'd ever meet—a truly kind, good person, soft-spoken, who was easily amused by the silliest jokes from those around him, and he contributed so much to the STC. He always wanted to help and support those around him, and he took every opportunity he could to do so. He was passionate about his activities with the STC, as it was a prominent part of him.

Even his obituary—**https://www.maugergivnish.com/obituary/donn-deboard**—prominently highlighted his activities and accomplishments with the STC. Donn was a member of the STC for almost 35 years, and his exuberance for the STC was with him right up until the end. The STC will certainly miss this bright light, but not more than those of us in his own Philadelphia Metro Chapter, who will miss him the most.

From Tim Esposito

When I heard of Donn's sudden passing, I was shocked. After calling several chapter members who knew Donn and seeing that his obituary was published, I shared some memories and photos of Donn on Facebook. There was a flood of condolences from STC members around the world. Members from India to Australia to Canada and across the US commented, sharing their memories of Donn. The level of dedication Donn had toward STC did not go unnoticed by its members and his friends.

To me, Donn was the most wonderful and friendly person ever—always optimistic and helpful. When I was STC-PMC president for two years, Donn did an incredible job with our scholarship and mentoring program, especially with Drexel.

We attended several STC Summits together, and he was even my roommate at one. In 2016 I received the Associate Fellow award at Summit. During a break in the proceedings, I went to the restroom, where I was unable to extract some food from my teeth. In bursts Donn, proclaiming, "Tim, they are starting the Associate Fellow awards, and you're up next!" The bathroom was some distance from the awards ceremony (maybe three miles?) and the two of us sprinted down the corridor in our dress clothes. Someone handed me my blazer as I ran past them, and I put it on as I ran onto the stage. Without his help, maybe I'd still be in that bathroom because I'm sure that piece of food is probably still in that tooth. And that's the lame kind of jokes that I make which Donn would laugh out loud at.

Once, Donn, fellow STC-PMC member Jessica, and I booked our Summit flights together. We all got to the airport early in the morning for breakfast and sat together on the flight. The two of them fell asleep right away. Once we landed in Los Angeles, we took a shuttle to the hotel. We dropped our bags off and promptly walked across the street to Disneyland. The first thing we did was the Indiana Jones ride, which Donn approached with some trepidation, as he was afraid of motion sickness. I told him that he could handle it, and the three of us had a great time on the ride. He thanked me several times that day for

Figure 2. Donn receiving his Fellow honor at the 2014 STC Summit.

Figure 3. Donn presenting at CONDUIT in 2014.

encouraging him to go on the ride. So emboldened, he rode through the Haunted Mansion (turns out the car is a little tight for three adults) and Star Wars. Donn thought it was hysterical when we sang the Darth Vader theme to his name: "Donn, Donn, Donn DeBoard, Donn DeBoard …" We all had so much fun.

At his memorial services, Donn had his STC Fellow pin on his lapel. His wife was so proud of the work he had done in technical communication that a large portion of his obituary—three of the six paragraphs—was dedicated to his volunteerism with, and service to, STC. Although Donn has passed on, his gentle guidance has led many aspiring technical communicators on their career paths.

Upcoming Online Courses

Learn more and register at **www.stc.org/education/online-courses.**

Introductory Markup and Scripting with HTML and CSS

19 January – 23 February 2021 (Tuesdays)
2:00 PM-3:30 PM ET (GMT-5)

Instructor: Dr. Craig Baehr

This six-session course will introduce participants to introductory markup and scripting with HTML and CSS. The course will also introduce students to readings, resources, and tools available to help develop basic coding skills through practice.

Design Thinking: A Bootcamp for Technical Communicators

1 February to 15 March 2021 (Mondays)

Instructor: Jason Tham

Design thinking is a process with a set of methods and mindsets that helps technical communicators generate original ideas that are rooted in the needs of the users. Students get hands-on training in designing and building innovative solutions for future growth. You will also learn approaches and techniques to tackle real business problems and develop a portfolio of design work that appeals to designer thinkers.

Understanding the Language of Science

1 February to 22 March 2021 (Mondays)

Instructor: Steve Darian

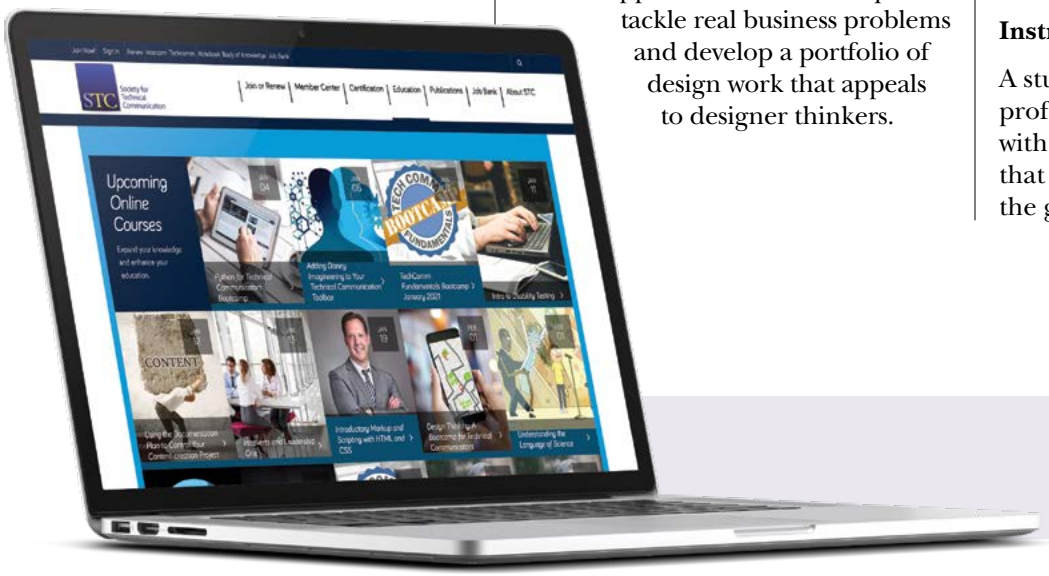
This course will analyze those features of language that are commonly used in scientific discourse, and in analytical thinking in general.

Technique in Nonfiction: The Tools of the Trade

1 February to 22 March 2021 (Mondays)

Instructor: Steve Darian

A study in all the writing tools professional writers use to connect with their readers; no matter who that reader is. And no matter what the genre.



Experiences and Skills Most Appealing to Managers and Key to Getting a Job During the Pandemic

BY KIT BROWN-HOEKSTRA | *STC Fellow and* **CINDY CURRIE** | *STC Fellow*

What kinds of university-based experiences are most appealing to tech comm management? STC student membership? Publications or projects? Extracurricular and service activities? Coursework? And because so much training happens on the job, what is most important for students to know how to do on their first day? What is the value of references and certifications versus soft skills in the job search process?

Most managers look at a potential job applicant's involvement in many things. When you make time to go beyond the minimum requirements and invest in your own success, it tells managers that you are a go-getter and that you are invested in your career. When you invest in yourself, it makes other people also want to invest in you. Most managers recognize the dedication, commitment to the profession, and hard work that it takes to get a master's degree or a PhD.

Expanding beyond your academic experience to things like STC Student Membership and showing a level of involvement in STC demonstrates that you are actively making the transition to professional life.

Moving from a Student Membership to a Professional Membership is also advised.

Publications? Great! Again, this shows effort to share knowledge you've gained.

Acquiring a professional certification like CPTC Foundation might help if you are starting from a bachelor's degree and have little practical experience. For people with master's degrees and PhDs but little practical experience, managers also look for an ability to apply what you've learned in class and research to practical, real-world applications.

It is important to recognize that, in a corporate environment, *done* is more important than *perfect*, and there will always be trade-offs to be made. Showing that you understand this idea will go a long way in your interviews.

References? Always a plus, but most people only get references from people they know will give good ones, so these might not be as important as the other things.

The real secret sauce for us is an applicant's personality traits. Managers are looking for enthusiastic, persistent, eager-to-learn, self-motivated, trustworthy, committed team players. Because so much of tech comm is interacting with other people, good interpersonal skills are table stakes for finding a position in today's world.

It's all about the team and how well you play with others! During the interview process, managers will be assessing your interpersonal skills and trying to get a feel for how you will fit in with their existing team and the team members on the product or solution team they might be hiring for at the time.

You can learn tools and technologies (and will do a lot of that on the job). You can learn processes and workflows and more, and you will. For entry-level positions, we assume that we will need to train you on tools, processes, and practical applications of the concepts you have learned. We expect you to understand the core competencies in technical communication, at least at a conceptual level.

There are many things in our profession that you can only get good at by doing them. When you are looking for your first position, ask interviewers about their training, mentoring, and onboarding plans. Take advantage of every learning opportunity that comes your way.

In interviews, be proactive and show your enthusiasm in your body language and your actions. Research the company and, because most people are working virtually right now, ask what the expectations are about this situation. Make sure that you have a dedicated spot in your home where you can work comfortably and without distractions.

How do you expect the pandemic to affect job searches for upcoming graduates?

With everything virtual during the pandemic, new grads will need to be creative about networking and finding job opportunities. The STC Mentor Board can help you find someone to talk to and provide help with your résumé and interviewing skills. The STC Job Board has many opportunities, as well.

The great thing about the current situation is that most companies are totally virtual, so you can live anywhere. In other words, don't restrict your search to your current locale.

The downside to the current situation from a job search perspective is that a lot of companies are holding off on hiring, especially at the entry level, and job opportunities can be harder to find.

To maximize your chances at landing a job mid-pandemic, take these steps:

- Make sure your LinkedIn profile is complete and updated. Review your social media for anything that might detract professionally and remove it or lock it down.
- Connect with the STC special interest groups and geographical communities to network. See if you can volunteer for something that's important to you.
- Read some articles on how to work effectively in a virtual environment. Make sure you have a dedicated workspace (even if it's a desk in the corner of your bedroom). Set a schedule for yourself and stick to it.
- Remember, job hunting is a numbers game. Treat the job hunt like a job. Set a goal of three to five job submissions per day focused in the industry or technical communication specialty you are most interested in. Apply even if you only meet 80% of the requirements. Follow the instructions and set a reminder in your calendar to follow up after a week or two, then do it.
- Be proactive and reach out to connect with people. Practice your videoconferencing skills and make sure that everything in view of the camera is professional and tidy.

Ask a Tech Comm Manager is an advice column geared toward answering all those questions you have, but might be uncomfortable asking. We glean the questions from social media, forums, and most importantly, from you, dear reader. If we don't know an answer, we will interview experts and get information for you. Send us your questions to *kitbh.stc@gmail.com* or tweet them to *@kitcomgenesis* or the hashtag *#askTCmgr*.

- Continue taking classes and building your skills.
- Take regular breaks in nature and turn off your devices to reset your brain and rejuvenate (even 15 minutes helps). Do something nice for yourself every day, and be patient with yourself and others. Everything is more challenging and takes longer right now.
- Read *Atomic Habits* by James Clear and start building a schedule and plan that helps you be productive. This is a marathon, not a sprint.

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Ethical Use of Data Protects Technology Users and Producers

BY RUSSELL WILLERTON | *STC Member*

WE KNOW THAT information is increasingly valuable. Technology companies collect it from us when we use or buy their products. Marketing companies collect, buy, and sell information about what we buy and when, where, and how we buy it. Your organization, whatever it is, collects, stores, and uses information from those with whom it interacts.

Data collection and data storage are woven into the goods and services offered by companies and nonprofits large and small. When all goes well, the experience is seamless, but when data systems are breached and information is stolen, we are reminded that the information we value may turn dangerous when it falls into the wrong hands. Hackers use stolen information to steal identities and the financial accounts connected to them. Criminals use software to take over personal computers or organizational data servers and hold the contents hostage until ransom is paid.

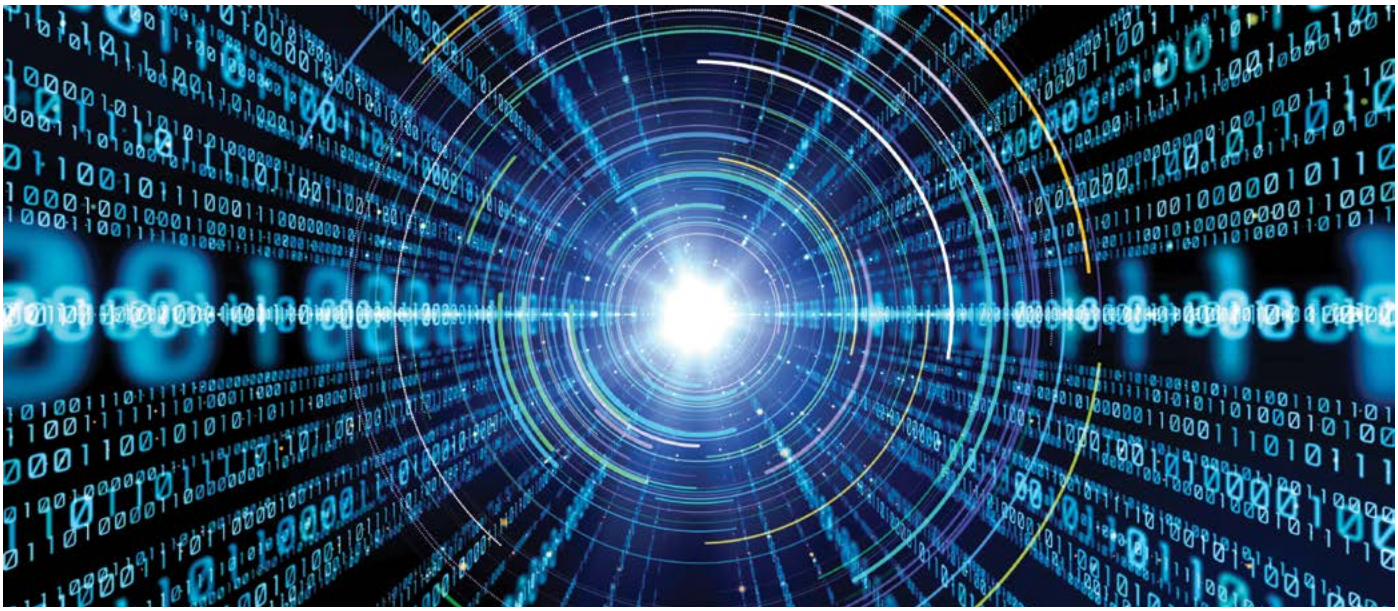
Because the potential for data to be misused is so great, it is increasingly important to handle data ethically. A recent e-book, *Ethics and Data Science*, encourages a broad view of ethics when it comes to collecting, sharing, interpreting, and visualizing data. This resource is not only for data scientists but is broadly useful for anyone working with information or data from other people. The authors are professionals with a range of experience in corporate settings. Mike Loukides is a Vice President at O'Reilly Media, Hilary Mason is a data scientist with experience in machine learning and artificial intelligence, and DJ Patil served as the US government's first chief data scientist.

Why is data ethics something technical communicators should care about? Modern organizations are built around data. The work that technical communicators do—as writers, as user experience experts, as business analysts, as developers of training materials—supports each organization's uses of data. Technical communicators can advocate for products, practices, and services that manage data responsibly. In this way, technical communicators protect the interests of their users—and their employers.

Below I summarize some key points from Loukides, Mason, and Patil's e-book.

Use Checklists to Build Ethics into Practice

Many professions have codes of ethics that outline principles of positive behavior. The Hippocratic Oath, or some variation of it, is frequently affirmed by those licensed to practice as physicians. In practice, however, swearing an oath tends to occur once or infrequently, and provisions for enforcing oaths are few. Similarly, many professional codes of conduct or codes of ethics are difficult to enforce, although some profession-



als, like doctors or lawyers, may lose their privileges after particularly egregious lapses in ethics.

However, checklists can affect activities positively if they are built into an organization's procedures and practices. Loukides, Mason, and Patil point to surgeon Atul Gawande's book, *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right* (a favorite of mine), as a positive example. Gawande provides data from around the world showing that hospitals big and small had better outcomes and fewer deaths after surgeries when members of the surgery team followed checklists for safety and hygiene. An important aspect of the surgery checklists is related to enforcement: Without unanimous consent that a checklist item has been satisfied, the surgery cannot go forward. This means the most politically powerful person in the room—the surgeon—cannot simply boss around the others and begin an operation before the team is ready.

Similarly, the authors point to the principle of the "Andon Cord" in the Toyota Kaizen method of manufacturing. Any worker on a production line may pull the cord, figuratively or literally, to stop the line if a problem arises. Contemporary companies frequently develop new products quickly, pushing them out and then reacting when they break, fail, or go awry. If a company culture values data ethics, employees will be empowered to raise concerns and take action when data use problems arise instead of merely hoping that they go away.

Technical communicators frequently use checklists for audience analysis, project planning, and project management. Loukides, Mason, and Patil offer several checklist items that can be used to generate discussion about ways to collect and use data ethically. Discussion of ethics can be integrated into just about any process. Of course, checking a box does not ensure that a person or group is behaving ethically. As companies integrate ethical concerns into their processes, they also integrate ethics into the corporate culture.

The Five Cs of Data Ethics

Loukides, Mason, and Patil provide the following five concepts, or framing guidelines, to consider when collecting and using data from users.

- Consent: Companies should not collect data from users of a product or service without users' consent.
- Clarity: Terms of service should clearly state what a company wants to do with the data collected; too often, these documents bury a company's intentions behind obtuse, confusing verbiage.
- Control and transparency: Related to clarity, companies should give users levels of control over their data instead of forcing all-or-nothing choices.
- Consistency and trust: Companies should demonstrate their concern for users by consistently and proactively protecting their data.
- Consequences: Companies should protect against unforeseen consequences of data loss or misuse—and even decide against products and services that involve great risk. One example of unforeseen consequences can be found in the case of Strava, which makes wearable GPS devices. When the company released data to help people find new locations for exercise, the locations of US troops wearing Strava devices in Iraq and Afghanistan were revealed.

Connecting Ethics to Company Culture

Loukides, Mason, and Patil emphasize that abstract ideas about ethics need to become part of a company's culture. They list several opportunities for this, including asking prospective employees to respond to questions involving ethical issues and going beyond standard financial concerns to question a new product's impacts in environmental, cultural, and ethical areas. To promote further discussion, they provide a link to case studies on ethics and artificial intelligence from Princeton's University Center for Human Values (UCHV) and Center for Information Technology Policy (CITP).

Take an inventory of your company's ethics: What principles of data ethics does your company uphold? To what degree is ethics a part of corporate culture? What steps does your organization take to protect customers' data?

Loukides, Mason, and Patil point out that strong ethics are good for business. If you see an opportunity to improve your company's data ethics, don't let it pass by.

This column features ethics scenarios and issues that may affect technical communicators in the many aspects of their jobs. If you have a possible solution to a scenario, your own case, or feedback in general, please contact column editor Russell Willerton at *russell.willerton@gmail.com.*

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Procedures for Pandemic Interactions

BY KIRK ST.AMANT

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC has changed almost every process of our lives. As societies reopen, the challenge becomes maintaining social distancing during essential interactions. As with prior public health crises, effective social distancing will be essential. Such practices require organizations to provide procedures for maintaining a safe distance when moving through daily activities.

Technical communicators can play a central role in such processes. By tapping their expertise in providing instruction, they can create the content that promotes safe interactions in pandemic contexts. The key is focusing on areas where social distancing can be difficult. This can be done by focusing on prepositions that convey how individuals move through public spaces. Such approaches apply to any public health situation where social distancing is essential to safety.

Preposition 1: *Into*

All buildings have a limited number of entry points, and individuals often cluster there at the start of the workday or school day. Social distancing can be difficult in these locations as individuals try to get *into* a location on time.

To address this situation, organizations need instructions explaining how to enter *into* such spaces in safe ways. These instructions might include staggered entry times (e.g., "Individuals in Group 1 enter from 8 to 8:05 a.m."), order of entry (e.g., "Individuals in Group 1 will enter in the following

order ..."), and direction for spacing when entering (e.g., "Wait two seconds before following another person into the building.").

Preposition 2: *Through*

Once inside a location, individuals usually need to move *through* that space to a particular place within it. This movement often involves traversing confined areas like hallways, stairwells, or elevators—spaces where social distancing can be difficult.

To address this factor, organizations need to provide individuals with procedures for moving through confined spaces when going to locations within buildings. These procedures could include instructions for when and how individuals should move through restricted areas (e.g., "Move in single file on each side of a hallway, with both parties moving down their respective right side of the hallway."). Procedures should also include guidelines for maintaining distances when moving through such spaces (e.g., "Keep a one-second gap between you and the person in front of you, and stop when they do—while always maintaining a six-foot gap between you and the person in front of you.").

Preposition 3: *Within*

Once individuals reach their intended destination within a building, there is a new challenge of how to interact in that location. Telling individuals to "maintain effective social distancing at meetings" leaves it up to each person to determine such spacing, and even if individuals assume a particular distance upon entry, that does not mean they will maintain it during interactions (e.g., reflexive movement toward others to show them something).

Organizations should therefore provide guidelines on maintaining effective social distancing during meetings (e.g., "Keep two arm's lengths, or six feet, between you and others at all times.").

Preposition(s) 4: *From*

In addition to entering locations, organizations need to provide individuals with processes for exiting *from* a location.

These materials could include instructions for how to depart a room in a building (e.g., "To leave this space and move through, go out of, and depart this location, do the following ...").

Alternatively, such procedures might simply inform individuals to use a reverse of the instructions for entering a location to leave it (e.g., "Follow the same instructions for moving through hallways/exiting buildings when departing work.").

Such materials make individuals aware of the need to follow certain protocols when entering into and departing *from* a location.

Disseminating Information

In developing these resources, technical communicators need to determine the best method for sharing information with individuals. Making these resources available online and for mobile access, for example, makes them readily available to many people entering, moving through, or exiting buildings.

Limited or spotty mobile access in a location, however, can limit access to essential information. For this reason, organizations also might consider providing printed instructions at entry points and in key locations within buildings for visitors to consult when moving through a setting.

The central point to remember is to provide such procedural information on social distancing via different media and in different locations to ensure it can be accessed and used by audiences.

Final Thoughts

Creating protocols and procedures for social distancing during pandemics can be challenging. Thinking of such processes in terms of prepositions for movements into and through locations can help technical communicators identify situations where such materials are needed.

The suggestions described here are one approach to processes that are important when addressing public health concerns involving communicable disease. Technical communicators can expand upon these ideas to help their organizations—and society overall—address safety concerns through effective social distancing during a pandemic.

Note: *This column is adapted from the online article, "Prepositions for Planning Post-COVID-19 Processes," available online at https://communicating-about-covid19.weebly.com/prepositions-for-planning-post-covid-19.html.*

The author wishes to thank Tom Johnson for his help in drafting this text.

This column provides information on trends, practices, and resources for applying technical communication skills in health and medical settings. Columnist Kirk St.Amant is the Eunice C. Williamson Chair in Technical Communication and a member of the Center for Biomedical Engineering and Rehabilitation Science (CBERS) at Louisiana Tech University. He is also an Adjunct Professor of Technical Communication with the University of Limerick in Ireland and a Guest Professor of Usability Studies with Southeast University in China. He contributes two columns ("The Cognitive Communicator" and the new "Health and Medical Communication") to STC's *Intercom* magazine and serves on *Intercom's* Editorial Board. Contact him at *kirk.stamant@gmail.com* to submit or pitch a column idea.

Helping Others Communicate During Times of Crisis:

An Interview with Stuart Culshaw, Tech Writers Without Borders

BY SCOTT ABEL

SCOTT: STUART, THANKS for allowing me to interview you for my column, "Meet the Change Agents." Before we dive into the interview, can you tell our audience a little about your history and how you came to technical writing as a career?

Stuart: I'm originally from England but have spent my entire working life in France. My first job was with a French software start-up near Paris. I discovered my affinity for technical writing and later went on to complete a professional certificate in technical communication at the American University of Paris.

In my 25-plus years as a technical writer, I've worked for several French and international software companies. Over that time, I've gradually moved away from software documentation to more general internal communication and training development roles.

I served for many years on the board of the STC France chapter, and since I first learned to code HTML back in 1994, I've been creating and managing websites for a variety of nonprofit organizations.

Scott: Your career trajectory landed you in an exciting place during these challenging times. I stumbled across your work with a group in which many of our readers will be interested. Tell us a little about Tech Writers Without Borders [TWWB]. Who was involved in its creation, and what were your original goals for the organization?

Stuart: The idea for TWWB first took shape back in 2015, when a friend and former colleague moved from Silicon Valley to Mali, a French-speaking country located in sub-Saharan Africa, to help run science and technology summer camps for kids. Aware of my previous work with nonprofits and my involvement with STC France, he reached out to translate their lesson plans into French.

Someone in our community suggested reaching out to Translators Without Borders [TWB], a global collective of volunteer translators that help nonprofits with their translation

needs. Reaching out to TWB, we were able to get everything translated in time for the first summer camp.

Inspired by the TWB concept, I began to formulate the idea of doing something similar for technical writers.

Scott: Was there a specific aha moment that led you to recognize the need for an organization like Tech Writers Without Borders?

Stuart: Yes, this came a couple of months later, when my friend in Mali reached out once more to share some of the challenges he was facing getting their summer camp program off the ground. It turned out that, while the lesson plans had been well translated, many of the local teachers, for whom French is already a second language, had struggled to understand the guidance.

That was when the light bulb went off. We set about forming a pilot project to help rewrite and adapt the curriculum materials to the teaching team's needs ahead of the following year's summer camp. We suspected that there must be many nonprofits out there struggling with similar content issues that impact their ability to do great work. If we could bring together enough like-minded technical communicators, we felt we could make a difference while offering engaging hands-on learning opportunities and showcasing the profession's value.

The concept inspired my former STC France board members, Toni Ressaire and Nancy Larbi, so the three of us cofounded Tech Writers Without Borders as a stand-alone nonprofit association in October 2016.

Scott: What challenges did you face (if any) attempting to get the organization off the ground?

Stuart: If anything, we somewhat underestimated the complexity of managing technical writing projects with groups of remote volunteers. Since many volunteers work or study full time, they can only fit so much volunteer work around their day jobs and family life.

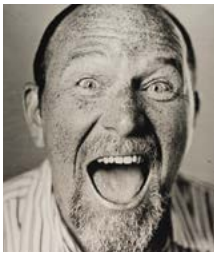
Because translation work differs in significant ways from documentation projects, we had to invest some time in rethinking how we might make a volunteer-based technical writing program work. Before we could divide up the work among the team and begin writing, we had to figure out how we were going to handle all of the issues you might expect in a traditional documentation project and agree on a project methodology.

We also worked to ensure that we left the staff of the nonprofit organizations we serve with the ability to update and easily edit the content we created for them. As a result, we had to rule out any sophisticated content management system that one might encounter in a corporate setting to simplify the collaborative authoring process.

Scott: We often learn lessons only after we attempt to implement our ideas. What lessons did you later learn about your original ideas, and what types of changes have you had to make as a result of learning those lessons?

Stuart: We spent far too much effort exploring how to scale our operations by considering various potential project management approaches, authoring platforms, and governance models. As a result, we got tied up in these issues and hesitated to take on any significant new projects. In 2019, the team hit the pause button and took a step back to reevaluate our approach.

I continued working with several organizations, one of



In the digital age, change happens quickly. This column features interviews with the movers and shakers—the folks behind new ideas, standards, methods, products, and amazing technologies that are changing the way we live and interact in our modern world. Got questions, suggestions, or feedback? Email them to *scottabel@mac.com*.

which was Professionals Doing Good [PDG], a social enterprise based in Cambodia that, in a similar way to TWWB, works to connect skilled professionals with local nonprofits. Luisa Gentile, PDG's founder and a former corporate HR professional, was kind enough to share her advice for managing successful volunteer engagements in return for my help in making improvements to her website. PDG is now partnering with TWWB to identify new virtual volunteering opportunities suitable for TWWB members among the organizations that PDG serves in Cambodia.

Scott: While an organization like TWWB could provide a variety of services, what is the current mission of the organization, and who are you attempting to serve, specifically?

Stuart: Our primary focus is on boosting grassroots organizations' capacity by developing communication and training assets to help them streamline their operations and improve the skills of their staff and volunteers. This focus includes nonprofits and social enterprises based in developing countries and those in our communities.

The types of requests for assistance we receive vary considerably. Organizations ask us to assist them with things like transferring classroom training materials to an online learning platform, scripting a video for a crowdfunding campaign, creating

documentation for an open-source software project, or developing or proofreading grant proposals.

Scott: Is your most significant challenge getting volunteers to work on projects, or finding the projects in need of volunteers, or something else?

Stuart: We've certainly not had any problem finding willing volunteers. We currently have over 800 people in our LinkedIn community, and this number continues to grow daily. These members are based worldwide and represent a wide range of skills from across the field of technical communication.

We need help in identifying projects in need of volunteers. We've started working with partners such as Professionals Doing Good to help identify new projects, but we're always looking for new opportunities.

Scott: University technical communication programs seem like potential partners for TWWB because students need practical experience and real-world examples to fill their portfolios before entering the labor force. Have you seen any interest from college and university programs?

Stuart: Absolutely. Providing a real-world experience for students and recent graduates of technical communication programs has been part of our mission. We've helped several students find internships with our nonprofit partners and have recently developed ties with several academic institutions in Europe interested in integrating charitable project work into their course curriculum. We'll be working on this initiative over the summer, intending to roll out a pilot project this fall.

Scott: What type of projects would volunteers have worked on before the COVID-19 crisis interrupted life as usual? Has the coronavirus pandemic created an influx of requests for help, and if so, what types of projects are you seeing as a result?

Stuart: In many ways, the coronavirus pandemic has been instrumental in kick-starting our activities again after a long period of reflection.

Back in March of this year, when the speed and scale of the virus's impact first overwhelmed healthcare authorities across the globe, numerous grassroots initiatives sprung up to address the urgent need for personal protective equipment [PPE]. A project to develop documentation and specifications to help gain regulatory approval for a low-cost ventilator came to the attention of TWWB co-founder Toni Ressaire while working with Technically Write IT [TWi], a documentation services company based in Ireland. Toni's relationship with TWi led us to develop a coordinated effort to fulfill similar requests for help coming in from those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We sprang into action by putting out a call for volunteers. Toni and her colleagues set up a data-gathering chatbot that allowed both nonprofit representatives and tech writers to register for volunteer services. TWi supplied project management and technology services to coordinate the work effort. Within two weeks, we had almost 200 volunteers registered.

At the time of this interview, we've placed 50 or so of those volunteers on a wide range of projects. With the pandemic raging, we continue to receive requests for assistance. Our volunteers are transforming hand-sketched equipment designs into technical specifications, documenting engineering processes, producing web and social media content, and writing and editing regulatory compliance documents, safety notices, signage, and user instructions.

One group in Ireland, called Comfort4Covid, provided digital tablets to the elderly and isolated persons in long-term healthcare facilities like nursing homes. Volunteers developed simple, clear instructions to help residents use messaging services such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Skype to communicate with their families.

Given the urgency of the situation, there was no time to plan. As with many things over the past few months, much of this work was improvised, and yet the results have been substantial. Without the rapid intervention and hard work of our volunteers, many of these initiatives would have struggled to get off the ground quickly.

These are excellent examples of how reliable content processes and the skills and dedication of technical communicators can bridge the gap between good intention and real impact.

Scott: Running a nonprofit with good intentions is a great thing, but it's sometimes hard to determine the best strategy for moving forward. What do you need today to help you meet—or exceed—your goals for the organization?

Stuart: That's certainly something with which we struggle. Our recent experience with the COVID-19 pandemic has caused us to rethink our original approach. We are now moving forward with several new initiatives and partnerships without overthinking things. Our new strategy: "Just do things!"

We're actively seeking to recruit a larger group of core volunteers to help drive these new initiatives, drawing from the vast pool of talent that we've built up over the last couple of years.

One urgent question that we now need to address is revenue generation. We've not had many expenses until now. Still, as we ramp up our activities, we will need to generate revenue to cover growing expenses and ensure we can become sustainable in the long term. We're looking into various options in this area.

Scott: Would a software platform (like a project management system) or a customized interface of a proprietary tool be useful to your organization as it grows?

Stuart: Yes, we would certainly be interested in exploring project management and collaborative editing platforms that could assist with project execution.

Scott: Leadership is often one of the main stumbling blocks to the growth of nonprofits. Have you a need to have leaders join the group who might have relevant experience and adequate time to dedicate?

Stuart: Yes, we're actively seeking to expand our leadership team. Having access to an advisory board would undoubtedly help us grow and scale our operations.

Scott: Women in Localization has a robust mentoring program to create future women leaders. They assign members who participate in the program with an experienced mentor, then they put them in charge of leading real-world projects that they can tout on their LinkedIn profiles and their resumes. Can you see value in mimicking their approach?

Stuart: Yes, this is an excellent initiative. Mentoring is a critical component of the academic collaboration project that we are currently developing. I can see us developing other mentoring efforts in the future to help build future project leaders.

Scott: If you could speak directly to a community of technical communication professionals, like the readers of the STC *Intercom* magazine, what would you like to say to them about TWWB?

Stuart: Join us! Use your professional skills for good. Volunteering is a great way to gain experience in a related field—something that you might not get a chance to do as part of your day job—and can help boost your career potential.

If, like many others during these challenging times, you find yourself "on the bench" or otherwise without work, volunteering can be a great way to maintain and develop your skills while also improving your network, all of which can lead to new opportunities.

One of the reasons I find the "Without Borders" moniker so appropriate for our profession is that, as tech writers, we can use our core skills in a variety of related disciplines. If you've hesitated or not found an opportunity to do so in the past, then volunteering with TWWB could be an excellent way to expand your professional horizons.

Scott: If our readers want to get involved, what's the best way to do that?

Stuart: Start by joining our LinkedIn group. You'll be able to network with a great crowd of like-minded professionals, and you will be the first to learn of new volunteer opportunities. If you already work or volunteer for a nonprofit or know of any organizations in your community that could benefit from more help, introduce them to TWWB.

Scott: Stuart, I'm afraid we've run out of time. Thank you so much for your volunteer efforts and for making time to share with our readers the story of Tech Writers Without Borders.

Stuart: Thank you, Scott, for everything you do to promote the discipline of technical communication and for the personal interest you have taken in Tech Writers Without Borders and our goal to provide opportunities for tech writers to use their skills for good.

Additional Resources

- Comfort4Covid: comfort4covid.org
- COVID documentation projects: documentingcovid19.com
- Professionals Doing Good: professionalsdoinggood.com
- Technically Write IT: technicallywriteit.com
- TWWB website: techwriterswithoutborders.org
- TWWB LinkedIn group: linkedin.com/groups/8437644
- Women in Localization: womeninlocalization.com

STUART CULSHAW *(stuart.culshaw @twwb.org) is Communications and Enablement Lead for IBM's Chief Privacy Office and Cofounder of Tech Writers Without Borders. Based in Grenoble, France, Culshaw holds a bachelor's degree in European business studies from Groupe ESC Bordeaux/the University of Humberside. He also holds a Professional Certificate in Technical Writing from the American University of Paris. Connect with Stuart on LinkedIn: linkedin.com /in/stuartculshaw/*

Quilt making

BY ANDREA L. AMES | *STC Fellow*

TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION IS a gorgeous tension between creativity and structure, and so, for me, is making quilts. I love the interplay of color and shape and how a print, when cut up and sewed back together, can look completely different. I think of it as painting with fabric.

You might think quilts are just blankets—something to keep you warm at night or while you watch TV in the winter. Or you might think of their historical uses—informing conductors on the Underground Railroad or communicating something about the times in which they were made through the blocks and patterns and fabrics included.

But for a quilt *maker*, quilts are so much more—and more like technical communication than you might think.

Take single sourcing, for example: One fabric—the black, white, red, and gray print in figure 1—produced all of the *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragons* hexagon blocks in figure 2. (Can you find the hidden dragons?)

Consider structure and architecture: Visually communicating the *Circle Dance* intertwined paths and light and shadow in figure 3 required a specific, structured approach, just as creating the solid, three-dimensional cubes in *Forest Sparkle*, shown in figure 4, required a two-dimensional architecture.

Quilters can show our work, have it judged, and win accolades, as you can see by the third-place ribbons from a Maine quilt show on *Circle Dance* (figure 3) and *Forest Sparkle* (figure 4), which also won second place in a California show.

We need the right tools for the job—for the actual quilting (stitching together the top, back, and a layer of batting between them), the longarm quilting machine shown in figure 5. And we work in teams, called "bees," like the participants in the local quilt guild, which is our version of STC, where we obtain much of our professional development.

In the end, as with technical communication, after we've applied all of our creativity, hoping to inform and delight our viewers, quilts are most often put to practical use. Whether lying under them for warmth or sitting on top of them like a cushion, we want our users to derive success from our quilts, whatever "success" means for those users: Warmth, comfort, a historical or family legacy, or perhaps just a little joy.

ANDREA AMES *(andrea@idyllpoint.com) has been designing and making quilts and patterns, teaching quilt design and various quilt-making techniques, quilting quilts, and collecting fabric for 30 years. She loves to simplify and teach patterns and techniques that seem complex so that any quilter can achieve wild success with their work of art. You can see more of her quilts in her "Andrea's Quilts" public photo album on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/alames/photos_albums.*

Figure 1. Back of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragons, *showing the print fabric used for the hexagon blocks in the quilt top.*

Figure 2. Front of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragons, *designed using the "one block wonder" technique developed by Maxine Rosenthal. (Do you see the dragons?)*

Figure 3. Circle Dance, *designed using the Circle Play approach developed by Reynola Pakusich.*

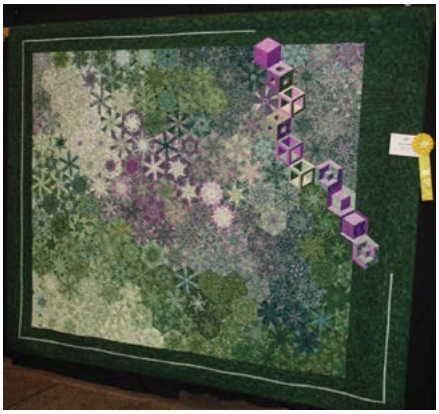


Figure 4. Forest Sparkle, *a two-fabric "one block wonder" quilt with various cube styles.*

Figure 5. Gammill Vision longarm quilting machine with 26-inch machine head and 12-foot frame.

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STC Annual Summit	8
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